Current Gains and Future Outcomes
Charles L. Glaser; John C. Matthews III


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Current Gains and Future Outcomes

Charles L. Glaser
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To the Editors:

John Matthews has offered an interesting reformulation of how and when concern over relative gains acts as a barrier to cooperation. He introduces the concept of "cumulation effects": gains cumulate when current cooperation creates advantages that increase the probability of additional gains in the future. This concept clarifies why states are sometimes concerned about relative gains, focusing our attention on their impact on the future. Matthews argues that states' sensitivity to relative gains increases with increases in cumulation, and employs his argument to explain behavior in both the international economic and security realms.

Matthews' framework is logically sound and appears to work well on the economic cases that he explores with it. However, I believe that he has misapplied it in the security realm. The relative gains problem is first and foremost about gains in ends. In the security realm the key end is security. Matthews, however, focuses on relative gains in means—for example, power and relative force size.

Confusion about whether the focus should be on ends or means pervades much of the discussion of relative gains in the security realm; Matthews has not created it. This conflation of ends and means supports the mistaken belief that states are especially severely constrained by relative gains concerns when evaluating whether to cooperate on security issues. The implications are dramatic: framed incorrectly in terms of means, relative gains problems are everywhere in the security realm; framed correctly in terms of security, the relative gains problem essentially ceases to exist. I begin by explaining the nature of this common misunderstanding, and then discuss the implications for Matthews' analysis of cooperation on security issues.

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3. Matthews does not present an extreme form of this view, arguing instead that sensitivity to relative gains in the security realm varies according to the extent of cumulation. However, as I explain below, focusing on ends instead of means would eliminate the appearance of any relative gains problems for the type of security cooperation that he considers.

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One background point is essential for understanding the relative gains problem in the security realm. States pursue security cooperation to achieve the end of security,\(^4\) power is a means to this end, but not an end in itself. This is a somewhat contentious claim, as whether power is a means or an end is a source of disagreement among realists: structural realists accept this position, while classical realists disagree. I assume the structural realist position in my discussion because the concern over relative gains has its origins in structural realism.\(^5\)

In the context of the relative gains debate, a policy provides an “absolute gain” when it increases what a state values, that is, increases its achievement of ends. To see this, consider the classic formulation of the problem of relative gains. Structural realists argued that states that could achieve absolute gains from cooperation, and would therefore want to cooperate, might nevertheless refuse to cooperate because cooperation would also result in relative losses. That absolute gains should be understood to be gains in ends flows directly from the requirements for a state to find cooperation desirable. By definition, a state will find cooperation desirable when it increases what the state values; consequently, for absolute gains to make cooperation desirable, these gains must be in the achievement of ends. Feasibility requires meeting a further condition. Cooperation will be feasible only if both states would achieve increases in the achievement of ends; feasibility therefore requires that cooperation produce absolute gains for both countries.

In the security realm, therefore, absolute gain refers to an increase in security; relative gain refers to a relative increase in security, not in power.\(^6\) However, much of the discussion of relative gains in the security realm incorrectly focuses on changes in states’ power. Power is a relative concept that compares states’ resources. When the relative gains problem is formulated in terms of power, absolute gains are in resources, e.g., force size; relative gains are in relative resources, e.g., the relative size of military forces, which is a measure of power. Although this alternative formulation is not logically flawed, it inadvertently addresses a quite different set of issues: whether cooperation will increase a state’s military capabilities and in turn its security. This is obviously a key issue, but not what the relative gains problem is about.

One way to appreciate this distinction is to notice that the formulation of relative gains that focuses on means adds nothing to standard criteria for evaluating the desirability of security cooperation; nor does it fit well with the way that relative gains entered the current debate. Analysts of security cooperation have usually applied the weight of their efforts to determining whether arms control agreements would enhance military capabilities. Relative force size influences military capability and therefore

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4. States might also pursue security cooperation to save money, but to keep things simple I do not address that possibility here.
6. I present this argument somewhat differently in “Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help,” *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/95), pp. 50–90, esp. pp. 73–75. Matthews recognizes this point of disagreement (p. 118) but concludes that my discussion is “vague”; I hope that my presentation here is more convincing.
plays an important role in these analyses. This observation, however, clashes with the way that relative gains entered the current debate. The original argument was that neoliberals had done an adequate job of dealing with cheating as a barrier to cooperation, but had overlooked the impact of relative gains. This could not be the case, however, if relative gains are measured in terms of changes in relative force size or, more generally, in power. Before considering the problem of cheating, neoliberals would have to evaluate whether cooperation would be desirable, that is, increase the state’s security; this requires considering the impact of cooperation on relative force size. In other words, if relative gains focused on means, criticism of neoliberals for not including concern about relative gains in the security realm would not have made any sense, since any assessment of cooperation would necessarily already include it.

Another way to appreciate the problem with a means-based formulation of relative gains is to recognize that it makes the insight offered by the concept of relative gains essentially trivial. I illustrate this by considering the example of cooperation to reduce military forces. Assuming for the moment that the absolute gains of interest are in means, then in this example absolute gain refers to reductions in the adversary’s forces. To say that a state finds cooperation desirable because of absolute gains is equivalent to saying that the state finds cooperation desirable because the adversary would reduce its forces. And then to say that a state might nonetheless decide against cooperating due to concern over relative gains is equivalent to saying that the state is concerned about how the proposed reductions in its forces compare to the adversary’s reductions. Observing that a country would be better off if only its adversary made concessions, but might not be better off if it had to make reciprocal concessions, is correct, but reduces the relative gains problem to an insight that is so obvious as to be uninteresting. If this is all that the concept of relative gains has to offer, then we should scrap it.

Moving back to the correct formulation, in which the absolute gains of interest are in ends, the question immediately arises: why should states ever care about relative gains? A common assumption about state preferences, which I will use here, is that states are egoists—they are interested in maximizing their own absolute gains and are indifferent to others’ gains. But then how could states ever care about relative gains, if they do not care about others’ gains? The answer lies in the possibility that ends are simultaneously means, or are directly related to the production of means. For example,

8. The neoliberal analyses that Grieco refers to did not actually perform this type of assessment because they were cast in general terms, not the specifics of security cooperation. My point is that these general arguments implied this type of analysis; applying them to security cases would require analysis of the impact on relative force size.
9. I believe that this assumption is consistent with Matthews’ analysis and thus is not a source of disagreement. I also believe that the assumption of egoism is appropriate for the states envisioned by structural realism. Many discussions in the relative gains debate disagree; see, for example, Grieco, “Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation”; and Robert Powell, “Absolute and Relative Gains in International Relations Theory,” American Political Science Review, Vol. 85, No. 4 (December 1991), p. 1313, but see also footnote 5, which lends support to the alternate formulation. I think that here again this disagreement reflects disagreement over whether the focus should be on ends or means.
economic ends—wealth—can simultaneously be means in the security realm, since states can use their wealth to acquire military forces. When ends are simultaneously means, states will appear to care about relative gains in ends, but in fact their willingness to cooperate will be influenced by their concern about relative gains in means that accompany gains in ends. Because a relative loss in means could reduce the state’s ability to achieve absolute gains in ends in the future, it faces a trade-off between current and future achievement of absolute gains in ends. I think this is another way of explaining what Matthews has highlighted by developing his concept of cumulation. For example, he argues that “the concept of cumulation is, therefore, that a state is able to take a current relative gain and use it to increase its power or wealth vis à vis another state during later interactions” (p. 123).

To summarize where we are so far, cooperation might fail due to a problem of relative gains when 1) cooperation would provide mutual absolute gains in ends; and 2) ends produced by cooperation are simultaneously means, or directly related to means. This simultaneous production of ends and means creates the possibility of a trade-off between the absolute gains that would be provided by cooperation and the possibility that a relative reduction in ends-generated means will reduce the state’s ability to achieve absolute gains in the future. When the trade-off is sufficiently severe, states will decide against cooperation, even though it would provide absolute gains in ends at the time of cooperation.

There seem to be good examples in the economic realm of absolute gains that can also serve as means, either within the economic realm or across issue areas in the security realm. I have already mentioned the example that has probably received the most attention: increasing wealth, which is the end pursued by economic cooperation, is a potential means in the security realm, since increased wealth enables a state to invest more in military forces. Consequently, under certain conditions, states are constrained in their economic cooperation by concern about the impact of relative increases in wealth on their future security. Matthews’ discussion of cases of economic cooperation focuses on the possibility that ends will serve as means in the economic realm. For example, he argues that states will be concerned about relative gains when success in one round—which I would measure in terms of increases in profits or wealth—also provides means, such as increased market share or essential experience, that influence the probability and/or extent of economic gains in future rounds.

Examples in the security realm in which the ends provided by security cooperation also serve as means are less obvious, and I believe less common and important.\textsuperscript{10} When cooperation increases two countries’ security, but unequally, how can the country whose security increased more use this increased security to reduce its adversary’s security? One possibility is that the state’s increased security results from increases in its offensive capabilities, which could also be a means of expansion for reasons unrelated to security. But this example fails to meet the first necessary requirement of the relative gains

\textsuperscript{10} By this I do not mean to imply that relative gains concerns will generally play a significant role in inhibiting economic cooperation. See Peter Liberman, “Trading with the Enemy,”\textit{International Security}, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Summer 1996), pp. 147–175.
problem—namely that both states achieve absolute gains. If cooperation increased the state’s offensive capabilities, then the other state’s security would decrease. Cooperation would be impossible due to the lack of mutual absolute gains, not due to concern over relative gains.

When then might security cooperation provide ends that also serve as means? I have considered two such possibilities elsewhere and will only mention them briefly here.11 One possibility lies with arms control agreements that, in addition to increasing security, also save money, which is another end, and can be used to fuel economic growth. The country that saved more from cooperation might enjoy greater growth, eventually enabling it to compete more effectively in the security realm. A second possibility could be cases in which differences in the levels of states’ security influences their ability to use competition-in-risk-taking strategies to achieve economic or foreign policy goals that are not directly related to their core security interests. I am inclined to believe that neither of these possibilities occurs frequently and that they are rarely very significant when they do occur. It is for this reason that I believe that relative gains are rarely a significant barrier to cooperation on security affairs.

Why do so many other analysts believe that the relative gains problem often exists and is often severe in the security realm? As I have already suggested, I believe that the key source of this misunderstanding is that they focus on means—power—instead of ends—security.

Part of this confusion appears to arise because power is a relative concept. It is often defined in terms of the ratio of one state’s resources to another’s; resources can be measured in terms of a variety of factors, including wealth, population, natural resources, and deployed military forces. Shifting the ratio of resources in my favor necessarily shifts the ratio against you. Appreciating the relative nature of power, analysts then misinterpret states’ concern over power as an indication of concern over relative gains. Although this type of argument may sound or feel like an argument about the relative gains problem, it is not, because the focus is on gains in means, not in ends. By miscasting the nature of states’ concern over power, this type of argument provides the wrong explanation for failures of cooperation, focusing on relative gains instead of the lack of mutual absolute gains in ends.

Matthews’ discussion of cumulation and of security cases provides examples of this type of argument. Consider first his discussion of cumulation in the security realm. He argues that “if there is offense advantage, cumulation effects exist and relative gains concerns will be high. This is because when there is an offense advantage the state that gains relative to another will be able to use this in the future to set conditions and rules of future interactions, or even to attack the state that takes the relative loss” (p. 126). Although Matthews’ description of how the security implications of relative gains in force size, or power more generally, vary with the offense-defense balance is accurate, he is not describing a relative gains problem. In the situation he describes, relative gains in power will increase one country’s security, while reducing the other country’s security. Cooperation will not occur because the country whose security would be reduced will refuse to cooperate. In other words, the lack of mutual absolute gains

precludes cooperation. In this circumstance this is not a relative gains problem, because the loser does not face a trade-off between increased security and reduced means for achieving ends—security or wealth—in the future; rather, its security would simply not be increased by cooperation.

A similar problem confronts Matthews’ argument that “an arms control advantage . . . could also have cumulation effects on the battlefield, in that such early advantages could condition outcomes at each stage of a war, with each victory making the next more likely” (pp. 125–126). It is true, as Matthews argues, that when offense has the advantage, the attacking state may benefit more from an advantage in force size and will be able to shift the ratio of surviving forces further in its favor in the initial and following battles of a war (p. 136). It is also true that when arms control would have this effect, cooperation will not be possible. However, once again the barrier to successful arms control is the lack of mutual absolute gains—the state that would be disadvantaged would see arms control reducing its security—and this is why it would refuse to cooperate.

I believe that the infeasibility of mutual gains in security better explains the failure of conventional force negotiations (MBFR), which Matthews explores in his article and explains in terms of relative gains under conditions of offense advantage. Matthews’ own summary of the MBFR case suggests my alternative explanation: “Each feared that a change in the status quo would give the other a relative gain and make it less able to accomplish its own strategy” (p. 139). But if a country concludes that changes in the size of deployed forces will reduce its ability to accomplish its own strategy, then it is likely to conclude that cooperation will reduce its security. In other words, it will decide against cooperation because it would not provide absolute gains.

Finally, in discussing why relative gains constraints did not prevent success in nuclear arms control, Matthews writes that “it simply is not costly to lose relatively in one round, if a state has second-strike capability. Thus, while the United States and Soviet Union were conscious of the numbers, the risks associated with erring were low and relative gains concerns were manageable” (p. 145). Matthews is here measuring relative gains in terms of changes in relative force size—means—not in terms of the implications of relative changes in security—ends. If cooperation would not jeopardize either country’s second-strike capability, then neither has suffered a meaningful loss in its ability to perform military missions or in its security. Therefore, from the perspective of the problem of relative gains, neither country has lost relative to the other; relative gains do not constrain because they do not exist.

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12. Matthews does not actually refer to shifting the ratio of surviving forces, but does argue that “a win at any particular stage increases the chances of victory at later encounters through attrition of enemy morale and strategy” (p. 136). I interpret “attrition of enemy strategy” to be the ability to shift the ratio of surviving forces.

13. These observations also apply to Matthews’ claim that “in arms control . . . cooperation will be hampered more by relative gains concerns when states fear that mutual cooperation now could . . . hinder their ability to defend or retaliate against security threats in the future” (p. 125).

14. Matthews argues that these relative losses did not prevent cooperation because cumulation does not occur when defense has the advantage. I would explain this without reference to relative gains, saying simply that differences in power are less important when defense has the advantage.
I anticipate that a counterargument to the one I have just presented is that security itself is a relative concept, not an absolute one. State A cares about State B’s security because increases in B’s security result in decreases in A’s security. Consequently, according to this line of argument, State A evaluates the impact of cooperation by comparing how much it gains to how much State B gains, since the less B gains, the more A gains. Thus, there is a relative gains problem. In this spirit, describing a view with which he appears to agree, Matthews argues that “power is the foundation of action in the international system, and power is only understood in relative terms. Accordingly, the field [of international relations] has come to see security itself as a necessarily relative concept” (p. 118). He adds that “security may be defined wholly by the relative standing of states” (p. 120).

I take the position that this line of argument is misleading, for two reasons. First, if security were defined this way, then although cooperation would rarely be possible, the reason would not be concern over relative gains, but instead the infeasibility of producing mutual absolute gains, which are a prerequisite for cooperation. If one state’s gain in security is the other’s loss, then both cannot gain, and significant cooperation on the size and type of military forces that states deploy would be impossible, because mutual absolute gains in security are impossible. This is not the case, as I explain below.

The second and more fundamental reason for rejecting this line of argument is that an increase in a country’s security does not always result in a reduction of its adversary’s security. In other words, security is not a relative concept. Recognition of the possibility of mutual absolute gains in security lies at the core of modern arms control theory. Thus, it is worth spending a moment to review how mutual absolute gains in security can be possible.

A country’s security is usually measured in terms of the probability of being attacked and the costs if war occurs; these depend respectively on the country’s ability to deter attack and its ability to defend if deterrence fails. If a country’s ability to deter and defend increases, then its security increases. For security to be a relative concept, policies that result in an increase in Country A’s ability to deter and defend would have to result in a decrease in Country B’s ability to deter and defend. But this need not be the case and often is not the case.

There are many types of cases in which the combined effect of changes in Country A’s and Country B’s military forces will be increases in both countries’ abilities to deter and to defend. Mutual gains can result from changes in technology, from uncoordinated

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Focusing on ends also suggests that neither country achieved absolute gains, which raises the question of why they went to great effort to achieve a number of agreements limiting nuclear arms. There are many answers, including that agreements increased security by providing capabilities in addition to second-strike capabilities, offered political benefits, and saved money, but these require a more detailed discussion of the cases.

15. I say “rarely” instead of “never” because two risk-averse states could both see benefits in an arms control agreement that reduces the probability of losses from an arms race, even if the agreement does not provide benefits compared to the status quo.

16. In general terms, this will depend on the severity of the security dilemma, including the value of the offense-defense balance, whether the offense-defense balance varies with force size, and whether offense and defense are distinguishable.
unilateral buildups, or from cooperative policies. For example, the invention of nuclear weapons made it possible for both the United States and the Soviet Union to increase their security through the deployment of highly effective deterrent capabilities. Two countries that are engaged in building up their conventional forces can both end up more secure, since, for example, the result can be higher force-to-space ratios, which improve each country’s ability to deter a blitzkrieg. Arms control can increase both countries’ security when agreements can be designed to limit or ban offense, while allowing defense, leaving both countries better able to deter or defend.

Moreover, an increase in Country A’s security can contribute to an increase in Country B’s security. Because insecurity can be a key source of expansionist behavior, Country A will often be less dangerous when it is more secure, which makes Country B more secure. This type of argument lies at the core of the security dilemma. This impact on B’s security will not depend on how the increase in A’s security compares to the increase in B’s security, because the change in A’s motives reflects its absolute security, not a relative measure of its security compared to B’s. The general point is that policies that increase A’s security can simultaneously increase B’s security. For all of the above reasons, security should not be considered a relative concept and, therefore, significant cooperation on security issues is sometimes possible.

In sum, Matthews has made a useful contribution by introducing the concept of cumulation to help explain variation in the impact of relative gains concerns on cooperation in both security and economics. While I believe that his framework is logically sound, his mixing of ends and means—security and power—creates problems for his application of this concept in the security realm. The unintended effect is to obscure that the relative gains problem will rarely, if ever, constrain security cooperation.

—Charles L. Glaser
Stanford, Calif.

To the Editors:

Professor Charles Glaser offers a provocative argument about the nature of security, one that challenges common conceptualizations. By arguing that security is best understood as an absolute rather than a relative concept, he suggests a unique way of understanding international politics, and emphasizes an aspect of security that has been underappreciated. Glaser’s reformulation leads to his argument that relative gains are not a problem in security. The real problem from Glaser’s viewpoint is achieving mutual absolute gains. This understanding of security as an absolute concept also forms the basis of his claim that many authors writing on the relative gains problem have mistakenly analyzed means rather than ends, resulting in the misperception that relative gains are a persistent problem in security affairs. Glaser’s points are clearly challenging.

17. The positive interaction should not be confused with altruism, that is, B is not better off because it values A’s security per se. Instead, as an egoist, B is better off because an increase in A’s security reduces A’s interest in pursuing actions that B considers dangerous.
to many of the writings on relative gains, and the assumptions that underlie those writings.

However, I believe that Glaser’s argument does not fundamentally undermine the literature on relative gains generally, or my own particular argument for why relative gains concerns might vary. Moreover, it is not obvious that Glaser’s reformulation of the relative gains problem in security significantly alters most analyses of the real possibility of cooperation; instead it may simply alter the terms used to describe those possibilities. Glaser’s arguments are deserving of a fuller treatment and examination than I will be able to offer here. In my reply to his letter, I will focus on the reasons why I believe that security should continue to be seen as a relative concept; the connection between what Glaser terms means and ends in security; and why the relative gains debate is legitimately about means as well as ends. I will also suggest why relative gains debates over means are not trivial.

Glaser maintains that security is best understood in absolute terms for two reasons. First, he notes that in the relative gains literature, absolute gains refer to gains in those things, ends, that a state values. Thus, as security is an end, increases in security are absolute gains. While this highlights a component of security that has been under-explored, it does not imply that the concept cannot have important relative components as well. States and people can value ends for both absolute and relative reasons. To illustrate, a state can have a certain absolute level of wealth and still be interested in whether it is more or less wealthy than its economic competitors. In security, two states could both gain security, but still be concerned with which state becomes more secure because of the implications that this has for future interactions in security affairs and other cooperation efforts. That an arms control agreement makes both states better off in one period or one issue area does not mean that it has no relative implications in other areas or periods. While Glaser points to the absolute nature of security, I would argue that security has both relative and absolute components.

Glaser further argues that security is best understood as an absolute concept because two states can increase their security simultaneously, and therefore security is not a relative concept. I agree that it is true in some cases that states may be able to simultaneously gain in security. But, as I argue in my case on nuclear cooperation in my article, I believe that states will achieve mutual gains in security, and thus cooperate, only when concerns over the relative gains in security are muted due to low cumulation effects. Glaser’s point that security is an absolute concept is right, in part. Unlike Glaser, though, I do not believe that this precludes security from being partly relativistic as well. States will still be interested in and concerned about which state is achieving more security due to the effects this may have on future bargaining and strategic interactions, i.e., due to possible cumulation effects. Even when two states both gain absolute security in Glaser’s terms, there can be important distributional issues about which

2. Ibid., p. 192.
state’s security has increased most, and how this may be used across issues and over time.4

*The Relationship Between Means and Ends*

In addition to the reasons above, security can and should be seen as a relative concept because of its intimate relationship with the means of providing security. The distinction between means and ends is, of course, the crux of Glaser’s critique of my argument and much of the literature generally. He maintains that the appropriate way to understand a gain is as an increase in an end, and that using means in this analysis is misleading. Conflating the two creates an incorrect analysis of the relative gains problem in international politics, and produces uninteresting results.

In contrast, I believe that the means in security affairs, power and capabilities, are too tightly connected to the ends, a state’s security, to be usefully separated. When we look at actual cases and operationalize a state’s security, it cannot be done separately from appreciating its relative standing among potential rivals in terms of power and capabilities. That is, a state is seen as secure when it has more or equal power to states around it, or when the distribution of capabilities is favorable to the state. The relationship between power and security is so direct and immediate that power is inseparable from and nearly coterminous with security. This is similar to wealth and money. In principle the two are different, but in practice money is so closely connected with wealth as to make the distinction undesirable and misleading in most cases.

Glaser notes that power is a relative concept, and that some realists do see power as an end. He rejects this in favor of seeing security as the end that states will pursue.5 However, it is appropriate to focus on power and capabilities as intermediate ends that states value due to their direct relationship with security. Some realists see power as an end of states precisely because it leads inexorably to security. Analysts of relative gains are justified in analyzing power and capabilities, means in Glaser’s terms, for the same reasons. Moreover, this focus is justified as a practical issue by the way in which states act. States rarely if ever try to measure security or wealth without reference to capabilities and money. Cooperation and defection do not revolve around abstract ends, but around means. In practice, state behavior is such that power and capabilities are ends in themselves for states. In fact, Glaser’s own analysis suggests that the key to understanding state interaction is a focus on means. His discussion of security cooperation, for example, illustrates that the critical point for analysis is possible disadvantages created in power and capabilities. In his distinction this turns out to be a problem of

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4. Glaser notes that he believes that states are rational egoists and believes that I hold the same position. I would argue, however, that states in most cases are defensive positionalists who do care about other states’ security because of the effect that it may have on their own.
5. One could argue that Glaser stops too short in finding ends that states pursue. That is, there is no reason to value security except that states value sovereignty. Thus, security is nothing but a means to a deeper end, the ability of a state to remain sovereign in a given territory. However, this distinction is not important because of the close connection between security and sovereignty, in the same way that the distinction between security and power and capabilities is not critical.
absolute gains in security, whereas in my argument it is a relative gains problem over an intermediate end, power, which is effectively the same as security.6

Glaser argues that framing the relative gains question in terms of means makes no sense, however, because neoliberals would have already calculated the effect of changes in means on the desirability of cooperation. I do not think that this is the case. The original neoliberal formulation of cooperation questions was bounded in terms of the issues considered and the benefits that were calculated; this was the basis of the original relative gains critique. In other words, neoliberals measured the desirability of cooperation in terms of increases in wealth as a result of, for instance, cooperation in trade. The original realist critique was that this did not consider the implications of these benefits on other realms that might make states not cooperate.7 To put it another way, determining the monetary flows that a state receives does not account for distributional issues that affect relative capabilities and power, which may in turn affect cooperation. Thus, it is not the case that any assessment of cooperation will have already factored in relative changes in means, either in other areas such as power (as in the original critiques) or over time in the same issue area (as in my formulation of cumulation effects).

As noted above, Glaser also argues that a means-based approach to relative gains leads to little value added in the field, produces few insights, and is uninteresting. I disagree. It is true that general formulations of security cooperation suggest that when a state is going to be relatively disadvantaged in cooperation over security means, that state will tend to find cooperation undesirable. However, by focusing on the links between means in different issue areas such as economics and security as prior relative gains analysts have done, and between means in different periods, as I have argued for with the concept of the cumulation effect, the relative gains literature does produce useful insights and explanations. For instance, using the two security cases from my article as illustrations, I can employ the concept of relative gains in power and capabilities, coupled with my hypothesis on the cumulation effects in security, to explain why the same set of states in essentially the same period of time was able to cooperate in one case, but not in the other. Focusing solely on immediate relative outcomes would not provide as satisfactory an analysis. Moreover, I can use the same hypothesis based on relative gains in means to explain outcomes in efforts at cooperation in political economy. In short, hypotheses on relative gains are valuable for directing our attention to specific and seemingly powerful variables, such as the cumulation effect, that can explain a wide array of cases with good parsimony.

As I noted above, Glaser’s letter and argument is important and useful. It should be considered in much greater detail than I can do here. However, as I have argued in this

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6. It is therefore unclear to me how much our analyses of the likelihood of cooperation differ. It seems quite possible that both Glaser and I would use similar factors and arrive at similar conclusions, disagreeing only about the terms used to describe the analysis.
7. As I note in my article, I see these kinds of trans-issue analyses as logically the same as my cumulation argument, which focuses on temporal dimensions of relative gains within the same issue area. Matthews, “Current Gains and Future Outcomes,” p. 122, fn. 34.
reply, I believe that Glaser’s critique does not demonstrate that “the relative gains problem essentially ceases to exist” in the security realm, and that means-based analyses of relative gains is an interesting and productive avenue of research and debate. Furthermore, as a conceptual point I disagree with Glaser that security is only an absolute concept.

—John C. Matthews III
New York, N.Y.