

# Survival politics

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# Summary

The multilateral order is in crisis. Generalised principles of conduct that have underpinned the order since the end of the Cold War – such as open trade, cooperative security, and universal human rights and international law – face severe contestation from multiple fronts. As a consequence, international organisations (IOs) as the stalwarts and embodiments of multilateralism have suffered from membership withdrawals, systematic violation of key rules, or funding cuts. The continued existence of a wide range of IOs is in jeopardy. Most scholarly accounts, however, only focus on the causes of the crisis of multilateralism. This dissertation fills this relevant lacuna by zooming in on the consequences of the crisis of multilateralism for IOs and their responses to it. It is guided by the research question: How do IOs respond to existential crises?

Threats to the survival of IOs are not new of course. Since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, IOs experienced crises and many have ceased to exist or operate in a meaningful way. Yet, two antithetical conditions distinguish contemporary from past crises for IOs. On the one hand, the contemporary crisis of multilateralism appears unprecedentedly intense and widespread. Threats emanate not only from dissatisfied rising powers, but also the US hegemon, Western electorates, and civil society actors. On the other hand, IOs have historically never been more powerful in terms of their authority, binding powers, and policy influence. The premise of this dissertation is that these two dialectic conditions give rise to distinct forms of IO behaviour.

## **Conceptual contribution: IO Survival Politics**

The dissertation offers a conceptual answer to the research question, which emerged inductively from the individual empirical contributions. Most scholars still consider IOs epiphenomena, functional instruments, or arenas for state bargaining. While more constrained than other units in the system, IOs are, however, potentially political actors. Some IOs have powerful resources, political levers of influence, and external supporters with stakes in the IO's continued existence. They are composed of individuals who likely identify with the mission of the IO and whose career prospects may be dependent on the organisation's survival. IOs, like other actors, therefore seek to survive. Indeed, the completion of several case studies crystallised a common and distinct logic of IO behaviour in diverse settings, which is conceived as *IO Survival Politics*.

IO Survival Politics is defined as the extraordinary political behaviour, both in degree and kind, by institutional actors to ensure the survival of the international organisation in existential crisis. The scope condition for IO Survival Politics is that IOs need to come under existential crisis, which put IOs at risk of no longer being able to effectively carry out some of their core functions. It is in the context of existential crises that IO may engage in Survival Politics. Crises contexts not only tend to enhance the role of key decision-makers as uncertainty and time pressure often privilege informal agency over institutional procedures. They should also alter the underlying behavioural logics of IOs as official develop survival instincts. When their

survival is at stake, they are likely to resort to exceptional behaviour because following the normal playbook is likely to be insufficient. They will probably intensify the strategies with which institutional actors exert influence during normal times. But senior officials may also go above and beyond the strategies used under conditions of normal policymaking and likely act with particular assertion and employ unprecedented measures as the short-term logic of survival overshadows long-term concerns over reputation or backlashes from member states. That is, the difference between the crisis and normal policymaking contexts is likely both in degree and kind.

IO Survival Politics consists of two distinct analytical stages. First, senior officials intellectually develop a survival strategy. While survival strategies will rarely appear as formalized master plans, to amount to a survival strategy there need to be clear indications that officials' responses were not of an ad-hoc nature but followed a discernible plan. The second stage of IO Survival Politics entails the implementation of the survival strategy. That is, institutional actors use their varying levers of influence to achieve their objective of survival. To amount to IO Survival Politics, these tactics need to be implemented with greater intensity and through distinct and extraordinary ways compared to conditions of normal policymaking. Unlike the first stage of Survival Politics, however, the implementation of survival strategy is not solely in the hands of institutional actors. IOs are rarely the most powerful actors and face significant legal and institutional constraints as well as structurally dominating member states.

IO Survival Politics draws on but goes beyond burgeoning research in the discipline of international relations on bureaucratic politics. Like bureaucratic politics, Survival Politics also emphasises the ways in which institutional actors wield influence in and over IOs. Both approaches thus share the same ontological foundation. But there are three reasons to assume that IO Survival Politics nonetheless logically differs in degree and kind from bureaucratic politics. First, institutional actors are likely to be more cohesive during existential crises than normal policymaking because preferences for a single outcome – survival – will be unified and strong. Second, institutional actors will likely have a shorter time horizon during existential crisis. With survival at stake, medium- and long-term reputational concerns should give way to the overriding objective of survival and thus remove obstacles to bold behaviour. And third, the nature of existential crises implies greater uncertainty among crucial actors about preferences and strategies and, potentially, the relaxation of some structural constraints, which should allow institutional actors greater room for manoeuvre.

In sum, the dissertation develops the concept of IO Survival Politics to grasp empirical realities and provides a framework of analysis as well as theoretical propositions that can guide research beyond the chosen cases. By providing a distinctly agential account on the crises of IOs, it challenges prevalent structural accounts. In doing so, the dissertation seeks to both advance the literatures on institutionalism as well as the crisis of multilateralism and initiate a promising new agenda for future research.

## **Empirical contributions: 3 IOs, 5 cases, 87 interviews**

The primary objective of this dissertation is to demonstrate that the behaviour of diverse IOs during periods of existential crises tends to follow a distinct pattern. Rather than aberrative incidences of political agency, it illustrates that IO Survival Politics is a logical response undertaken by a variety of IOs faced with diverse existential threats. To do, it analyses three IOs: the EU, NATO, and OSCE. This initial case selection follows four logics. First, with the exception of the EU, international security organisations are a comparably understudied population of IOs. Second, and as a corollary, international security organisations should be hard cases for exhibiting political agency. Third, there were also practical concerns due to the need to conduct dozens of interviews with officials. All three IOs are headquartered in Europe and the author possessed some pre-existing contacts in these organisations. And fourth, the political salience of cases, the author's previous expertise on the EU and NATO, as well as intellectual interests in European security served as motivation to focus on these organisations.

Crucially, there is substantial diversity among the chosen sample of IOs to buttress the claim that IO Survival Politics is not idiosyncratic but appears in a variety of contexts. The EU, NATO, and OSCE vary in their authority, institutional design, functions, size, and resources. In addition, the selected episodes of existential crises also display varieties of threats. This dissertation relies on five empirical cases to illustrate its core arguments: the EU's responses to the 1) Brexit referendum and 2) the crisis of multilateralism; NATO's responses to 3) the Presidency of Donald Trump and 4) recent EU's security and defence initiatives; and 5) the OSCE's responses to its legitimacy crises since 2014. In order to understand the micro-mechanisms of IO Survival Politics specifically and IO behaviour in crises generally, this dissertation therefore relies on 87 elite interviews with those key officials present in crucial meetings.

The empirical analysis yields three major overarching findings on the role of IOs amid the crisis of multilateralism. First, IO Survival Politics is a real-world phenomenon and occurs across a range of diverse IOs in face of diverse threats. To a varying degree, four of the five chapters represent cases of extraordinary political behaviour by EU and NATO institutional actors to weather what were perceived as existential crises. Unprecedentedly intense and extraordinary forms of behaviour abound; officials used innovative institutional designs of negotiation teams, emancipated themselves from and even opposed previous patrons, engaged in previously unthinkable forms of overt and political agenda-setting, or publicly confronted perceived challenger IOs. Thus, the dissertation shows that institutional actors can exhibit greater agency than even acknowledged in the bureaucratic politics literature. Indeed, in the cases of EU and Brexit and NATO and Trump, the influence of officials was arguably history-making.

Second, however, not all existential crises cause IO Survival Politics to the same extent. Notwithstanding common awareness of the existential nature of the respective crises, the empirical cases exhibit varying degrees of extraordinary political behaviour by institutional actors and, as a corollary, varying degrees of causal impact on the crisis outcomes. The EU's

handling of the Brexit negotiations and NATO's management of Trump are prime examples for IO Survival Politics in terms of both crafting a cunning survival strategy and successfully implementing it. In the cases of the EU's response to the crises of multilateralism as well as NATO's reaction to EU security and defence initiatives, the implementation of survival strategies was constrained by the role of member state preferences and complexity of shaping the actions of another IO. In turn, the OSCE actors' efforts to craft a survival strategy were limited and the implementation thereof failed almost entirely. Five factors are relevant in explaining the varied occurrence of IO Survival Politics: the degree of formal powers, informal leadership, the source of the threat, the constellation of member state preferences, and the temporal dimension of the crisis.

Third, IO Survival Politics is only a temporary remedy to the crisis of multilateralism. IO Survival Politics is a short-term response to specific threats. It focusses on symptoms, not roots of the crisis of multilateralism. NATO officials may have prevented President Trump from withdrawing the US from NATO, but they cannot resolve fundamental questions over burden-sharing or transatlanticism at a time of great power competition; Commission officials may prevent Brexit from causing a domino effect, but they alone cannot rectify the underlying flaws of the EU system of governance that contribute to Euroscepticism across the continent; EU officials can prevent the momentary collapse of multilateral organisations, but they cannot substantially reform IOs that suffer from a profound legitimacy deficit in the eyes of emerging powers; and OSCE leaders cannot bridge the fundamental geopolitical divide between Russia and the West to devise new common principles for the European security architecture. By weathering specific threats, what IO Survival Politics can achieve is to create the conditions in which fundamental reforms of the multilateral system become possible. IO Survival Politics, in other words, is more a painkiller than panacea for the crisis of multilateralism.

### **Implications of IO Survival Politics**

The dissertation shows that that the contemporary dialectic conditions of both unprecedented authority and crises give rise to distinct forms of extraordinary behaviour by institutional actors to save their IO in existential crises. IO Survival Politics is not an aberration but logical response by a variety of IOs to diverse threats. By directing attention to hitherto largely neglected agential qualities and types of behaviour by institutional actors, the dissertation revises scholarly understanding of IOs in crisis and thus seeks to fill crucial lacunae in the literature on the consequences of the crisis of multilateralism for IOs and their responses. The conceptualisation of IO Survival Politics should also advance institutional theory and provide the foundation for a new research agenda.

In addition to these scholarly contributions, the findings also bear important political and normative consequences. The dissertation allows for a better understanding of hugely salient processes of the crisis of multilateralism. Appreciating that individual agents carry much responsibility for helping key IOs like NATO and the EU survive recent crises should caution policymakers against any sense of complacency. These episodes were contingent and could have ended differently, which would have likely had drastic consequences for the shape of the

European order. Indeed, the cases showcase that institutional actors can only provide temporary relief but not permanent remedy for the malaise of the multilateral order. By helping IOs survive, they provided the context within which democratically accountable policymakers and civil society actors could set out to address the roots of the crisis and recast the multilateral order. Without substantial reform, however, the multilateral order will continue to be in a state of peril.