

The Survival of International Organizations: Institutional Responses to Existential Challenges

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Preface and acknowledgements

This book is the result of a five-year research project on the ‘decline and death of international organizations’ (called NestIOr) funded by the European Research Council (ERC) in which the four of us worked together (2019-2024). Well before it was a project, it had started as an intellectual exercise. The principal investigator of the project (Hylke Dijkstra) was curious about the ‘second half’ of the lifecycle of international organizations. While legions of scholars had studied the design and development of international organizations (IOs), no one really seemed to be interested in the decline and death of IOs. This was surprising as much of diplomatic history and political philosophy is about the rise *and* fall of different governance forms—once great powers, vanished kingdoms, and dissolved military alliances.

This intellectual exercise suddenly became more pertinent in 2016, because of the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump as U.S. President. Along with demands and pressures by the emerging powers, here was a real chance that established IOs would fall apart. To study these existential challenges to different IOs, Laura von Allwörden, Leonard Schütte, and Giuseppe Zaccaria joined the project as PhD candidates working on the policy areas of climate and energy, security and defence, and trade and development. Their purpose was to go ‘inside’ the various IOs and trace how these existential challenges play out. They conducted 114 interviews with IO insiders, the results of which are presented in this book.

After researching the decline and death of international organizations together for more than five years, we ended up writing this book about their *survival*. What we found across our case studies is that various institutional actors within IOs—political leaders but also the everyday officials—had developed proactive strategies to respond to existential challenges. They did not

sit back waiting for their organizations to be dissolved but rather stepped up and adopted a range of behavioural and discursive responses. In some cases, they helped their organizations to adapt to existential pressures. In other cases, they shielded their organizations from such challenges through careful resistance strategies.

For us, survival is therefore the story and oftentimes such ‘non-events’ deserve more scholarly attention. The dog that didn’t bark; the communist revolutions that did not happen in Western industrialised societies. But we feel that there is something more to the title and topic of our book. For us, it is also normatively important as scholars to provide a more optimistic account on the state of international cooperation. If all scholars and pundits talk about ‘the end of liberal international order’ and ‘the crisis of multilateralism’, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. For us, this would be a disservice to all the people at the machinery of international cooperation, who work hard every single day to address international challenges. While political philosopher Thomas Hobbes rightly notes that ‘nothing can be immortal which mortals make’—this clearly also includes IOs which one day will be dissolved or fall into desuetude—we should be careful not to easily write off the organizations that provide the very fabric of international cooperation.

We owe a debt of gratitude and that starts with our funder which has made our project possible. In formal terms, this book is the result of a project funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 802568). The ERC funding scheme is, of course, well-known, yet we only started to appreciate its merits when we were actually working on the project. ERC projects demand intellectual ambition and risk-taking, for instance by developing a theory on the decline and death of IOs that can turn out wrong. Moreover, ERC funds team science bringing

together complementary knowledge and skills in an integrated project. Finally, we felt a sense of responsibility to make the most out of this exceptional opportunity we were granted.

Beyond funding, we need to thank a range of colleagues who have been willing to engage with our project and scholarship. Within our ERC project we owe much to team members Maria Debre and Farsan Ghassim, who as postdocs have been instrumental for our team. Maria helped set up the project and establish our team. Her initial quantitative analyses also provided direction for our case study research. Farsan joined halfway through the project and provided much needed renewed energy for all of us. Both have also repeatedly commented on this book project, which has become better because of it. In Maastricht, we need to further thank Thomas Conzelmann, Sophie Vanhoonacker, and Esther Versluis who served as co-supervisors of respectively Giuseppe Zaccaria, Leonard Schütte, and Laura von Allwörden. They have been involved throughout the project as well and been a source of support.

A good number of colleagues and friends have taken an interest in our work by joining our kick-off workshop in Brussels in January 2020 and our final workshop in Maastricht in June 2023, serving on PhD defence committees, and by (repeatedly) commenting on our work: Johan Adriaensen, Michael Bauer, Steven Blockmans, Inken von Borzyskowski, Richard Caplan, Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, Julia Gray, Yoram Haftel, Tim Heinkelmann-Wild, Anna Herranz-Surrallés, Gisela Hirschmann, Stephanie Hofmann, Christian Kreuder-Sonnen, Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks, Bernhard Reinsberg, Yf Reykers, Thomas Sommerer, Soetkin Verhaegen, Stefanie Walter, Clara Weinhardt, and Carmen Wunderlich. There is now a true scholarly community that studies the decline, death, and survival of IOs in a most professional and collaborative manner. Thank you!

We have also presented our work at two dozen conferences, and we thank all the organizers, chairs, discussants, and participants. In particular, we would like to highlight two workshops where we presented earlier versions of this book. We are thankful to Tom Hunter and Stefanie Walter for hosting us at Lake Zurich for the workshop on ‘International Cooperation in Challenging Times’ on 3-4 October 2022 and Stephanie Hofmann for the workshop ‘Global order, international organisations and organisational options’ at the European University Institute, 13-14 October 2022.

This book is informed by 114 interviews with politicians, diplomats, officials, experts and other stakeholders at the various IOs we study. We are grateful to them for receiving us, including in videoconference calls during the pandemic, and taking us on a journey behind-the-scenes to comprehend the functioning of the various IOs.

As with most research, ours has been a cumulative project. Readers familiar with our work will recognize that our book builds on Hylke Dijkstra, Laura von Allwörden, Leonard Schuette and Giuseppe Zaccaria (2024). Donald Trump and the survival strategies of international organizations: When can institutional actors counter existential challenges? *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 37(2), 182-205. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2022.2136566> licensed under CC BY 4.0 and adapted here. This was a first comparative case studies article among the four of us where we focused on institutional actors. This book is naturally much longer, with a more developed argument, and also other types of case studies.

Readers may also recognize some of the specific case material, such as Laura von Allwörden (2024). When contestation legitimizes: the norm of climate change action and the US contesting the Paris Agreement. *International Relations*, advance online publication. © The

Author 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178231222874>, which has been adapted here (This material is not covered by the terms of the Creative Commons licence of this publication. For permission to reuse, please contact the rights holder); Leonard Schuette (2021). Why NATO survived Trump: The neglected role of Secretary General Stoltenberg. *International Affairs*, 97(6), 1863–1881. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiab167> licensed under CC BY 4.0 and adapted here; and Leonard Schuette and Hylke Dijkstra (2023). When an International Organisation fails to Legitimate: The Decline of the OSCE. *Global Studies Quarterly*, 3(4), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksad057> licensed under CC BY 4.0 and adapted here. The CC BY 4.0 licence is available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>. For enquiries concerning use outside the scope of the licence terms, please contact the rights holder. These previous articles were, however, stand-alone case studies engaging with different research questions and theoretical perspectives. This book therefore not simply brings earlier findings together but advances an innovative argument with new data as well. We are nevertheless pleased to acknowledge these original publications. We are particularly thankful to the various journal editors and reviewers who have improved our thinking.

This book manuscript has become much better because of all the constructive suggestions of the reviewers at Oxford University Press. They have gone above and beyond in trying to help us to articulate our argument better and encouraging us to bring out the interview data. We owe Dominic Byatt a lot for supporting this project from the beginning and his advice and full attention as we were writing this book. It is an honour to publish this book in the ‘Transformations in Governance’ series edited by Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks, and Walter Mattli, which has become a focal institution in its own right for scholarship on IOs.

We would not have been able to write this book without the support of our family and friends. Hylke Dijkstra likes to thank his family for all their support and his undergraduate professors who had him read the classics in diplomatic history and political philosophy. Laura von Allwörden likes to thank her parents and close friends for their support. Further, she would like to thank her PhD supervisors, fellow colleagues along the academic road and friends she made here along the way. Leonard Schütte is grateful for the generosity and understanding his family and friends exhibited throughout this project. Giuseppe Zaccaria likes to thank his partner, friends, and family for all the support they offered him during his PhD trajectory (and beyond).

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List of acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
APEC	Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AU	African Union
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
COP	Conference of the Parties
CFE	Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CPC	Conflict Prevention Centre
CSCE	Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
DSB	Dispute Settlement Body
ERC	European Research Council
EU	European Union
EULEX	EU Mission in Kosovo
G7	Group of 7
G20	Group of 20
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
HCNM	High Commissioner on National Minorities
IO	international organization

IEA	International Energy Agency
IBRD	Bank for Reconstruction and Development
ICSID	International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes
IDA	International Development Association
IFC	International Finance Corporation
IPU	integrated police unit
IR	International Relations (the academic discipline)
IRENA	International Renewable Energy Agency
LPAA	Lima-Paris Action Agenda
MDB	multilateral development bank
MPIA	Multi-Party Interim Agreement
MIGA	Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NAZCA	Nonstate Actor Zone for Climate Action
NDC	nationally determined contribution
NSC	National Security Council
ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
RFoM	Representative on the Freedom of the Media
SACEUR	Supreme Allied Commander Europe
SPSU	Strategic Policy Support Unit
TRIPS	Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights
UN	United Nations

UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNMIK	UN Mission in Kosovo
US	United States
USTR	United States Trade Representative
WHO	World Health Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization

1. Introduction

Shortly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the leading International Relations (IR) theorist Kenneth Waltz made the infamously wrong prediction that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) 'days are not numbered, but its years are' (1993, p. 76). With the principal threat out of the way, NATO no longer seemed to have a purpose. Waltz rhetorically asked '[h]ow can an alliance endure in the absence of a worthy opponent?' (p. 75). Against these odds, NATO survived the end of the Cold War. It adapted itself to the new security environment and NATO allies have sent military missions to Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Libya (e.g. McCalla, 1996; Wallander, 2000; Thies, 2009; Dijkstra, 2015; Johnston, 2017). NATO still continuously needs to prove itself. U.S. President Trump refused to endorse Article 5 and privately indicated that he wanted to withdraw the United States from the North Atlantic Alliance (Barnes & Cooper, 2019; Schuette, 2021a), while French President Macron called NATO 'brain-dead' (as cited in *The Economist*, 2019). Yet the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, once again, underlined the importance of NATO: Thirty-five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, NATO continues to guarantee the collective defence of Europe.

NATO is just one example of the many international organizations (IOs) that have faced existential challenges, defined as challenges that potentially put their ability to perform core functions at risk. The United States, for instance, stopped contributing to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) budget in 2011, thereby depriving the organization of nearly a quarter of its resources (Eckhard, Patz, & Schmidt, 2019). The United Kingdom quit the European Union (EU) in 2020, Burundi and the Philippines the International Criminal Court, Japan the International Whaling Commission,

and the United States put in motion the process of leaving the World Health Organization during the Covid-19 pandemic (von Borzyskowski & Vabulas, 2019). Meanwhile, the World Trade Organization (WTO) finds its Appellate Body inoperable following the American refusal to appoint judges (Payosova, Hufbauer, & Schott, 2018; Hopewell, 2021a, 2021b; Zaccaria, 2022) and the organization has been in a stalemate ever since the breakdown of the Doha Development Round in the mid-2000s.

Elsewhere in the international system, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was dealt a strong blow due to the withdrawal of the United States from the Paris Agreement under President Trump. This created fears that other states would follow the example thereby eroding global climate action (Jotzo, Depledge, & Winkler, 2018). The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), set up to mitigate East-West relations, was already on a downward trajectory long before Russia's invasion of Ukraine and is generally unable to provide common security for its participating states (Schuette & Dijkstra, 2023a). Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) demanded to be taken seriously in their Durban Declaration of 2013 and have set up alternative institutions that potentially challenge the existing postwar setup (Chin, 2014). Their view on global order has resonated with many other states leading to an expansion of the BRICS in 2024. A potent challenge comes from the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Liao, 2015; Ren, 2016; Hameiri & Jones, 2018). China has also attempted to capture key United Nations (UN) agencies and continuously challenges established UN human rights norms.

There is no shortage of scholarship discussing these existential challenges to IOs and the assault on the liberal international order more generally (e.g. *Foreign Affairs*, 2017; Ferguson &

Zakaria, 2017; Copelovitch & Pevehouse, 2019; Mearsheimer, 2019; Lake, Martin, & Risse, 2021; de Vries, Hobolt, & Walter, 2021). Coming from very different theoretical perspectives, scholars show how populism, nationalism, power transitions, and the ‘folly of liberalism’ explain the contestation of IOs and international institutions. For John Mearsheimer (2019), the liberal international order and its international institutions were ‘bound to fail’ (title), as they ‘contained the seeds of [their] own destruction’ (p. 7). Michael Zürn (2018) and his co-authors point at the rise of international authority—and liberal intrusiveness—since the 1990s. They argue that this almost inevitably resulted in a greater popular contestation of the IOs, since IOs have been the main beneficiaries of such increased authority (cf. Börzel & Zürn, 2021; Zürn, Tokhi, & Binder, 2021).

Whatever the precise underlying causal logics, the understanding among many is that the future of IOs is bleak. Contestation might cause ‘gridlock’ (Hale, Held, & Young, 2013) which no longer allows IOs and other international institutions to take on urgent policy problems. It might put them on a pathway to ‘decline’ (Zürn, 2018, pp. 13-14, 101, 255-257) or at least make IOs less central to international relations. The ultimate way for states to show that IOs have outlived their purpose is to disband them all-together. Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni (2020) finds, in this respect, that 39% of the IOs (218 out of 561) created since 1815 have formally ceased to exist (see also Pevehouse et al., 2020). Even if not formally declared ‘dead’, Julia Gray (2018) shows that no less than 38% of 70 international economic organizations were inactive during the period 1948-2013, thus essentially in a state of ‘coma’. While the termination of major IOs remains a rare event in recent history (Dijkstra & Debre, 2022), the degree of pessimism in the academic literature is considerable (e.g. Lake et al., 2021, p. 225).

The existing literature thus discusses many of the challenges that IOs face—the rise of China, hegemonic contestation by Trump, and how populist political parties complicate cooperation—yet scant attention is paid to the IOs themselves. IOs are implicitly portrayed as both victims and hapless bystanders as international and domestic politics unfold. How IOs deal with the various existential challenges is rarely the topic of academic inquiry as such. This is surprising for two reasons. First, IOs differ significantly. While IOs have some common defining features (cf. Pevehouse et al., 2020; Hooghe et al., 2017), they also vary to very large degrees in terms of institutional design (Koremenos, Lipson, & Snidal, 2001). They are like apples and oranges—two fruits that are round and of similar size, but have a different colour, taste, and texture (Rittberger et al., 2019, p. 5). This logically requires us to study how existential challenges play out across IOs. Second, IOs are generally considered—like all bureaucracies—to have a degree of autonomy and agency, as they are intentionally put at some distance from the member states to independently implement their mandates (Cox et al., 1973; Reinalda & Verbeek, 2003; Hawkins et al., 2006; Chorev, 2012; Bauer & Ege, 2016). Even in the face of formidable challenges, IOs are not powerless actors. They have options to respond.

When taking a first look at how IOs have responded to the existential challenges touched upon in the preceding paragraphs, we indeed see considerable variation. As mentioned, NATO is an example of an IO which has adapted several times to the changing international environment after the end of the Cold War. There are, however, many other IOs that have come out of existential challenges relatively unshattered. The EU and the World Bank have respectively dealt with the challenges of Brexit and the creation of the rival AIIB in ways that have consolidated their organizations. Other IOs have, however, been less responsive. The WTO has not been able to kick-start the Doha Round or revitalize its Appellate Body after the departure of Donald Trump. While the WTO continues to operate in several domains, it is considerably

less central to international relations than it was during the 2000s. The same can be said about the OSCE. As a security organization, it has not been able to address the deteriorating security environment in Europe since the 2010s.

When zooming in a bit, it becomes apparent that IOs have used a whole range of different strategies to cope with and counter existential challenges. In response to the outcome of the Brexit referendum, for instance, the European Commission appointed a high-level politician in Michel Barnier to keep the remaining EU member states together in order to resist most British demands. The World Bank leadership, on the other hand, took a much more accommodating—though proactive—perspective on the AIIB and reached out to shape this China-led institution in its own image. The UNFCCC secretariat, to give yet another example, had gradually built a strong external support network of state, sub-state, and non-state actors supporting climate action, which was activated to counter the challenges by Donald Trump to the Paris Agreement. Other IOs were far less proactive in developing strategic responses. For instance, the WTO Director-General did little to address the looming crisis of the Appellate Body and suddenly resigned during the Covid pandemic.

What explains these different responses by IOs? Complementing the state-centric literature which mostly studies the *causes* of existential challenges, this book focuses on the role of institutional actors of IOs—IO leaders and their bureaucracies—and analyses *their abilities to formulate and implement response strategies* to existential challenges. The book argues that these central institutional actors within IOs have a strong interest in the survival of their organizations and potentially a wide arsenal of behavioural and discursive strategies to cope with and even counter challenges that put their own organizations at risk. They can help, for instance, their IOs adapt to a changing international environment, resist the populist urges, or

face off competition from other IOs. The ability of institutional actors to respond and to strategically tailor responses to different types of existential challenges, however, greatly varies across IOs. While some institutional actors have considerable agency to purposefully respond to existential challenges, in other IOs their ability is severely constrained. By uncovering why some institutional actors within IOs can better answer to existential challenges than others, this book contributes to an emerging academic literature on the survival of IOs.

This book is therefore about the IOs themselves. It is about the Secretaries-General, Directors-General, and Executive Secretaries who lead IOs. But the book is equally about the middle-managers and the desk officers, who keep the machinery running, within the directorates of the international secretariats of IOs. They too can facilitate organizational adaptation and/or resist existential challenges. The book explains why these institutional actors, who serve principally the IO rather than member state interest, respond differently when their own livelihood gets threatened. Providing detailed comparative case studies of six IOs and original data from 114 interviews, the book goes beyond the official documents and public debates. It uncovers important behind-the-scenes processes about the survival of IOs and international institutions. Overall, it provides a corrective to the more alarming accounts of the crisis of IOs and presents a more optimistic take on the state of liberal international order and the future of IOs as major international vehicles for cooperation: Over the last decades IOs have survived key existential challenges and are here to stay.

1.1 The question

The last decade has been taxing for international cooperation with the rise of populism, the Trump Presidency, and the renewed assertiveness of the emerging powers. Various IOs have

been challenged repeatedly in ways that put their ability to perform core functions or even their very livelihood at risk. This book studies the varying responses by the institutional actors of IOs—IO leaders and their bureaucracies—to such existential challenges. Institutional actors have a strong interest in the survival and well-being of their organizations and likely fight tooth and nail to keep their IOs relevant. At the same time, institutional actors are heavily constrained in their actions. They may not have the necessary leadership, competences, resources, or networks to respond. Furthermore, as bureaucracies, institutional actors are often slow moving: They may not recognize existential challenges on time or are unable to formulate a purposeful response strategy. This book therefore studies the survival strategies of institutional actors within IOs and their ability to determine their own fate. It seeks to answer the research question *why do the institutional actors of IOs respond differently to existential challenges?* It is about institutional responses by IOs to existential challenges.

The examples in the preceding paragraphs of IOs facing existential challenges—from NATO to Brexit, WHO, and the Paris Agreement—have received considerable academic and public attention. This is for good reason. Existential challenges to IOs are important, because these are extraordinary moments in international relations during which a lot can happen. Not just to those IOs, but to international order more generally. IOs are, after all, institutions that bring a degree of permanence and continuity to the otherwise volatile relations between international actors. IOs reduce uncertainty, create stability, and produce collective goods—from collective defence and international justice to pandemic expertise and world heritage lists. As multilateral institutions, founded by three or more states, IOs are often designed to absorb the diverse inputs of international actors, notably from their member states, and address a range of everyday challenges. Yet existential challenges to IOs are not like everyday challenges that can be easily

absorbed. When IOs are existentially challenged, in ways that put their very organizations at risk, the institutions underpinning international order are at stake.

Conceptually, it is important to define ‘existential challenges’ and clarify how these challenges differ from other challenges or everyday ‘inputs’ that go into the political system of IOs (e.g. Rittberger et al., 2019; Easton, 1957). After all, IOs constantly face demands from their membership, but also from non-state actors, experts, and public opinion. Such demands are normally channelled through diplomatic routes, lobbying, and stakeholder consultations, but also more public routes. Around many IOs, there are lively debates in terms of public events, think tank papers, news media, and in some cases regular demonstrations. IOs clearly have to navigate such environmental demands. Existential challenges to IOs are, however, different. They are not about states blocking the consensus on a policy dossier, or activists and lobbyists voicing their concerns. Existential challenges are about the more fundamental undermining of IOs. In this book we define existential challenges as those that specifically *put individual IOs at risk of no longer being able to effectively carry out some of their core functions*.

Existential challenges therefore include two properties. First, they are about the core functions of IOs. Unlike regular inputs into the political system of IOs, existential challenges put parts of the very political system at risk (the polity). In the ultimate case, existential challenges may result in IO termination, dissolution, desuetude, or death (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2020; Debre & Dijkstra, 2021a). But there are also scenarios where IOs turn into ‘zombies’—organizations that continue to operate without much relevance to international relations (Gray, 2018). Furthermore, existential challenges can affect only part of the core functions of an IO. When the Trump administration, for instance, refused to appoint judges to the WTO Appellate Body it effectively rendered this adjudication court inoperable. The WTO continues to exist, but it

can no longer carry out its core adjudication function. Second, existential challenges are about potential risks to the political system. The outcome of such challenges is not predetermined. Existential challenges do not have to adversely affect IOs. IOs may be able to cope with or counter existential challenges. This makes it important to study the process of what happens when existential challenges to IOs arise and why IOs respond differently.

When an existential challenge hits an IO, all eyes are often immediately on the institutional actors which are the embodiment of IOs and vital for the everyday running of IOs. Through their position at the centre of IOs, institutional actors are potentially in a powerful spot to address existential challenges. And with their own jobs on the line, they are among the most motivated advocates for the survival of their organizations. Institutional actors typically include IO leaders or ‘heads’ (e.g. Cox, 1969; Young, 1991; Kille & Scully, 2003; Chesterman, 2007; Mathiason, 2007; Hall & Woods, 2018)—such as Secretaries-General, Directors-General, and Executive-Secretaries—and the international public administration, secretariat, or bureaucracy of IOs (e.g. Biermann & Siebenhüner, 2009; Trondal et al., 2013; Bauer, Knill, & Eckhard, 2016). Institutional actors are therefore *those actors who serve principally the IO institution rather than particular interest*. IO institutional actors thus do not include the member states meeting in the plenary organs or executive boards, nor the parliamentary assemblies or adjudication bodies (on the different IO organs: Rittberger et al., 2019, pp. 60-61). By studying institutional actors—IO leaders and their bureaucracies—the book thus focuses on the actors that make IOs go around and that play a lead role in addressing existential challenges.

By asking the research question why the institutional actors of IOs respond differently to existential challenges, we start from the assumption that institutional actors will potentially have some agency when their IOs are existentially challenged. This implies that institutional

actors have a private interest in organizational survival and that they have substantial political and bureaucratic resources at their disposal. Michael Bauer and Jörn Ege (2016) have referred to this as the bureaucratic autonomy of ‘will’ (their autonomous preferences) and ‘action’ (their discretion and resources). We assume that autonomy of will is strong for institutional actors, when faced with existential challenges, as their jobs, prestige, self-esteem, and institutions are at stake (e.g. Kaufman, 1976; Strange, 1998). With respect to discretion and resources, we focus in this book on IOs that have at least 250 officials though in some of the cases even thousands of bureaucratic staff members (see also methodology below). We assume that these are substantial resources allowing the IO institutional actors to potentially strategize and to formulate and implement responses to existential challenges.

In trying to answer the research question, this book puts forward two propositions. First, we expect that institutional actors will respond differently to different types of existential challenges. IO institutional actors are more likely to resist direct existential challenges by powerful states and more likely to adapt to indirect existential challenges where states establish competing institutions (Proposition 1). It is particularly difficult for IOs and their institutional actors to give in to powerful states, because unilateral demands by such states may erode the very mandate of the IO or put a burden on the rest of the membership (see on ‘accommodation dilemma’, Walter, 2021). Faced with such types of existential challenges, it is more likely that institutional actors use their resources to try to resist powerful states through a range of discursive and behavioural strategies. In the case of indirect existential challenges to IOs, where states or groups of states set up new competing institutions (‘contested multilateralism’, Morse & Keohane, 2014), we expect adaptive response by institutional actors. Once new institutions has been set up, the ship has typically sailed, and institutional actors in incumbent IOs will try to (re)establishing their central position in international relations, which requires adaptation.

We therefore expect institutional actors to tailor their responses to existential challenges, yet we also expect, secondly, that their ability to pursue strategic responses will depend on their own leadership, organizational structure, formal competences, and external networks (Proposition 2). IOs and their institutional actors have been constituted very differently with a wide variety of institutional designs, which we expect will affect their institutional responses. IOs have, for instance, very different types of leaders (Hall & Woods, 2018) some of whom may be better accustomed to deal with questions of institutional survival. Strategic responses by institutional actors are further not a given when IOs come under pressure (Chorev, 2012, pp. 28-41), as institutional actors should be able recognize the challenge on time, pick an appropriate strategic response out of a range of available options, and properly implement the response. This is a tall order as IOs and their bureaucracies can be inert (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Weaver, 2008; Bayerlein, Knill, & Steinebach, 2020). Going by some of the examples provided above—from high-level political leadership in the EU in response to Brexit to the UNFCCC secretariat relying on external networks, and the World Bank reaching out to the AIIB—we indeed witness a palette of different responses.

To conclude, this book addresses the question why do the institutional actors of IOs respond differently to existential challenges? It proposes to consider the *different types* of existential challenges as well as the *ability* of institutional actors to strategically respond. Institutional actors tailor their responses to the different types of challenges, yet their ability to do so may depend on their leadership, organizational structure, formal competences, and external networks. While some institutional actors will be motivated and at the forefront of protecting their IO, other institutional actors may not have the internal strength to do so. So even if institutional actors have major incentives to respond to existential challenges, strategic

responses are not automatically forthcoming. Which institutional actors put up a fight for their organizations and which ones do not? By uncovering why institutional actors of IOs respond differently to existential challenges, this book contributes to new insights on IOs and provides knowledge about whether IOs hapless bystanders as existential challenges unfold or active and purposeful agents.

1.2 The literature

By addressing this research question, this book contributes to the burgeoning literature on the crisis of liberal international order and the crises of IOs in particular. It takes, however, a distinctive perspective and makes two contributions. First, rather than studying the existential challenges—and their causes—as others have done, the book focuses on the responses of IOs and their institutional actors. It qualifies the extant literature by showing that institutional actors are not simply bystanders as their IOs get challenged. Second, this book questions the idea that IOs are by default slow-moving, sticky, and path-dependent organizations, gridlocked by veto-players and bureaucratic inertia. It shows that institutional actors of IOs can pursue proactive responses to existential challenges, helping their IOs to adapt and/or shielding them from the worst external pressures. Compared to the existing literature, this book thus studies the agency of the institutional actors to determine their own faith. It does so through a comparative case analysis of IOs informed by rich interview data.

Let us address these two contributions and the shortcomings of the existing literature in turn. First, much of the literature on the crises of IOs and liberal international order tries to *explain the origins of existential challenges to IOs*. Realist and domestic politics approaches are particularly vocal in debates on the liberal international order, while liberal-institutionalist

scholars have focused on the changing nature of international problems. The trouble with these approaches is that they do not tell us much about IO responses to existential challenges and thereby only present us a half answer. This is problematic as for all the challenges to liberal international order, we know very little about the actual consequences for IOs. Indeed, the very assumptions of these theoretical approaches, such as state-centrality or a focus on the domestic level, oftentimes get in the way in understanding effects at the IO level. Yet unless we know how existential challenges exactly play out in IOs, we cannot judge their significance in the first place. There is no space here to discuss these extant debates in exhaustive terms, but it is nonetheless instructive to briefly consider the main arguments.

The ‘trilogy’ by John Mearsheimer (1994, 2014, 2019) on institutional institutions broadly exemplifies the realist state-centric approach. In his view, institutional institutions are a mere reflection of great power politics (1994), unable to handle China as an emerging power (2014), and the liberal international order is simply a post-Cold War liberal folly that cannot withstand the realities of power politics (2019). Throughout these arguments, IOs are either forums where great power politics plays out, or temporary vehicles for member states to pursue their collective interests (e.g. Mearsheimer, 1994, pp. 13-14; Walt, 1990). Once relations between states become less cooperative, IOs will likely suffer. Changes in the power constellation among states will also have strong repercussions for IOs. A power transition from the United States to China, for instance, will likely negatively affect cooperation and raise zero-sum questions over participation in international institutions (e.g. Gilpin, 1981; Kennedy, 1987; Mearsheimer, 2001, 2019, pp. 44-48).

Domestic politics explanations of the existential challenges to IOs are perhaps less vocal but certainly at least as prominent. In a study of the EU, Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks (2009)

argue that the ‘permissive consensus’, in which elites insulated from domestic political parties and public opinion could promote cooperation, has made way for a ‘constraining dissensus’ in which those elites now must consider the domestic arena and ‘look over their shoulders when negotiating European issues’ (p. 5). The resulting politicization of international cooperation has offered opportunities for challenger political parties and ‘political entrepreneurs’ (De Vries et al., 2021) to blame IOs for rising inequalities due to globalization, cosmopolitanism undermining national identities, loss of sovereignty and control, and a general feeling of inefficiency. This argument is further strengthened by Michael Zürn (2018) and his co-authors (Zürn, Binder, & Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2012) who argue that the rise of authority of IOs since the 1990s has triggered politicization and legitimacy crises as IOs have relied too much on expert-based authority and arguments for their legitimation.

In addition to these realist and domestic politics approaches, a third set of liberal-institutionalist explanations focuses on the problem structure of cooperation (Keohane, 1984; ‘demand and supply’, Keohane, 1982; Moravcsik, 1993). Many international and cross-border problems are temporary and fluctuate over time, the argument goes, which likely affects the relevant IOs when the underlying problems disappear. International problems have become ‘harder’ and more complex resulting in institutional gridlock (Hale et al., 2013). Scholars have, in this respect, questioned the very design of formal IOs and argued that we need more informal institutions and networks (e.g. Slaughter, 2005). The rise of informal forms of international governance has indeed been steep (Westerwinter, Abbott, & Biersteker, 2021). With the increasingly overlapping scope of IOs (Haftel & Hofmann, 2017), we witness a degree of competition, not just between IOs themselves, but also with other forms of international governance (Morse & Keohane, 2014; Abbott, Green, & Keohane, 2016). Such competition

for the resources results in existential challenges for IOs that fail to be sufficiently focal, which in turn may lead to decline, specialization, or death (but see Reinsberg, 2024).

The origins of existential challenges for IOs and the variety in their causes are well-discussed therefore in the academic literature. Yet these approaches tell us less about how such challenges play out in IOs. Even if the logic of some of these arguments is endogenous—authority triggers politicization; or path dependent institutions no longer fit for purpose—these theories pay very little attention to the responses of IOs and award IOs little to no agency (Goddard et al. 2024; Kreuder-Sonnen & Rittberger 2023). This makes them deterministic. Yet IOs are clearly not ‘bound to fail’. Several IOs, as noted above, have come out existential challenges rather unshattered. More generally, many IOs have survived systemic transitions, world wars, periods of decolonization, and various economic and financial crises (Debre & Dijkstra, 2021a; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2021; Dijkstra & Debre, 2022; Haftel & Nadel 2024). Simply trying to explain the causes of existential challenges to IOs is therefore not enough. We also need to know how existential challenges play out within IOs and what IOs can do to respond when their livelihood is put at risk.

When it comes to the responses of IOs and their institutional actors to existential challenges, we do know from the literature that IOs are oftentimes considered as *slow-moving, sticky, and path-dependent organizations*, gridlocked by veto-players and bureaucratic inertia. The logic here, to put it somewhat crudely, is that those that want to challenge IOs will eventually encounter bureaucracy and give up as they run out of energy and political capital. Equally IOs will be very constrained in their abilities to respond to external pressures, as they are stuck between veto-wielding member states and their own bureaucratic complexities. This is the second point where we challenge the literature. While this institutional argument explains the

persistence of IOs, even when faced with existential challenges, in our book we highlight the actual strategic and proactive behaviour of institutional actors in IOs. Our argument is outlined below, but for now it suffices to say that institutional actors help their IOs adapt by facilitating compromises among the member states and/or engaging in layering strategies. Bureaucratic sabotage is part of their toolkit but, as we argue, oftentimes applied strategically. It is worth to review some of the arguments in the literature about sticky IOs before discussing the proactive behaviour of IOs.

The argument of institutional stickiness runs deeply throughout IO scholarship. Institutions are the rules of the game that structure how states interact in IOs (cf. North, 1990, pp. 3-4), and institutions established in the past continue to dictate present-day politics. As John Ikenberry (2018) has repeatedly noted, IOs and the American-led international order, as they have developed in the postwar period, are ‘easy to join’ and ‘hard to overturn’ (p. 24). In the rationalist variant of institutionalism, IOs and their institutional face an ‘accommodation dilemma’ where they may need to accommodate challenger states, but at the same time want to avoid that this creates opportunities for other states to challenge the status quo (e.g. Walter, 2021; De Vries et al., 2021; Jurado, León, & Walter, 2022). The status quo thus becomes a focal point from which it is difficult to pivot. Rationalists are also quick to point out that any change in IOs will be challenging due to the large number of principals and veto-players in IOs (e.g. Tsebelis, 2002; Nielson & Tierney, 2003). Existential challenges are therefore likely to lead to ‘gridlock’ in IOs (Hale et al., 2013) with limited response options.

In addition to the distributive and coordination games that member states play, scholars have also pointed out the lack of responsiveness by IOs from a bureaucratic perspective. Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore (2004) have developed the concept of ‘institutional pathologies’

where IOs can act in ways diametrically opposed to what their founders intended—for instance, UN peacekeeping failing to respond to genocide or the IMF deeply intruding in domestic policies. For them, we can only understand such IO behaviour by considering the bureaucratic logics within IOs. Others have made similar arguments about bureaucratic politics, organized hypocrisy, and administrative styles within IOs (Weaver, 2008; Bayerlein et al., 2020). Taken together—the difficulty of member states to reach compromises on reform and the bureaucratic inertia in the IOs themselves—results according to the extant literature in a strong status quo bias and a lack of general responsiveness. Path dependency is the result. Indeed, we are regularly reminded that many IOs no longer fit purpose and therefore lack legitimacy. The UN Security Council with its 80-year-old power constellation and the Group of 7 (G7) reflecting the economic reality of yesteryear are cases in point.

While this institutionalist argument certainly has its merits, that is IOs can be slow-moving and sticky organizations at times, we see something else across our empirical cases. In this book we will show that many IOs and their institutional actors were in fact rather responsive and proactive in responding to existential challenges. The eventual outcomes for IOs may well be the close to the status quo, but it was hard work for those IOs and their institutional actors to defend such status quo and avert scenarios in which their organizations would decline. In addition, the member states argument of veto-players and gridlock has proven less convincing in the empirical cases where IOs were existentially challenged. In those moments of crises, the formal rules often become fluid providing more opportunities for institutional leadership to develop purposeful responses (cf. Stone 2011; Kreuder-Sonnen 2019; Schuette 2024). We will develop the full argument below, and how it exactly plays out across different types of existential challenges and different types of IOs.

What appears from this review of the literature is that scholars insufficiently pay attention to the proactive responses of IOs to existential challenges. This is either because they account too little agency to IOs in international relations, are too busy studying domestic political debates, or assume that IOs are slow-moving and too gridlocked to be able to handle existential challenges. This lack of focus on IOs and their institutional actors, however, conflicts with the key recent advances on international public administration, where scholars have started to take an interest in the innerworkings of IOs. What is more, several recent single case studies seem to suggest that institutional actors play a lead and proactive role in crafting strategic responses to existential challenges (Hirschmann, 2021; De Sa e Silva, 2021; Heldt et al., 2022). This also includes some of our own work (Schuette 2021a, 2021b; Zaccaria, 2024). This book takes the next step by explaining why the institutional actors of IOs respond differently to existential challenges. We study positive cases where we can identify proactive survival behaviour, but also the negative cases where IOs failed to respond. This book thus contributes to the literature through comparative case analysis of six IOs and is informed by rich interview data.

In conclusion, the academic literature thus far prioritizes state-centric accounts of the crisis of liberal international order and the various existential challenges that threaten IOs and other international institutions. This does not sufficiently account for the variation among IOs and their institutional designs. Clearly some IOs will be better able to cope with existential challenges than others. Research on IO responses, however, remains more limited. What does become clear from those studies is that institutional actors generally play consequential roles. They do so, however, to different extents.

1.3 The argument and findings

This book argues that institutional actors in IOs can play a proactive role when their organizations are put at risk. They have a strong interest in fighting for organizational survival and they have a wide range of instruments to do so. Institutional actors can help their IOs adapt in response to contestation and/or help to resist and circumvent existential challenges. Institutional actors, however, respond differently to existential challenges: Institutional actors respond differently to specific types of existential challenges (Proposition 1); and IOs are differently constituted in terms of their institutional design and institutional actors thus have different abilities to respond to existential challenges (Proposition 2). Some institutional actors can be surprisingly proactive and effective, but they do need to recognize challenges and require leadership to formulate and implement strategic responses in time. We also argue that the internal organizational structure as well as the embeddedness in external networks are relevant for institutional actors when they are faced with existential challenges. IO institutional actors tailor their responses to the specific type of existential challenge, but we need to consider the very abilities of institutional actors to strategically fight for their survival.

In this book we provide evidence from six different case studies across three policy areas (trade and development; climate and energy; security and defence). Three of the case studies deal with the responses by international actors to direct existential challenges posed by powerful states. These focus on how WTO, UNFCCC and NATO institutional actors responded to the Trump administration refusing to appoint judges to the Appellate Body, withdrawing from the Paris Agreement, and challenging the very rationale of NATO. The three other case studies deal with indirect existential challenges resulting from the creation of competing IOs that draw from the same resource base. The book focuses on how World Bank, International Energy Agency (IEA), and OSCE institutional actors responded to the respective creation of the AIIB, International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), and EU crisis management operations. The

book thus presents evidence from different types of challenges posed to IOs across different policy areas. Across these six comparative case studies, we find considerable variation in responses by institutional actors to existential challenges.

Our starting point is that institutional actors play a central role in the lifecycle of IOs. Various scholars have already pointed at the role of institutional actors in the creation and development of IOs. We argue that institutional actors can equally be consequential actors in responding to existential challenges in order to avert paths toward institutional decline or even dissolution. Three decades ago, for instance, Oran Young (1991) pointed out that political leadership is necessary to establish international institutions. Tana Johnson (2014) furthermore compellingly shows that institutional actors often take part in the negotiations on new IOs and that they affect the institutional design of those new IOs in ways that benefits them privately. As IOs develop, over time, institutional actors have been found consequential as they can formulate new norms in IOs and help expand mandates (Weinlich, 2014; Hall, 2016; Littoz-Monnet, 2021; Debre & Dijkstra, 2021b). If institutional actors are causally important for IO creation and development, we argue they are also likely important in subsequent stages of the IO lifecycle.

Importantly, existential challenges are permissive of extraordinary behaviour by institutional actors. In normal times, IOs may face internal bureaucratic politics over limited resources and can be slow-moving. But if survival is at stake, the interests of institutional actors are likely to be more focused. In a classic in organizational studies, Herbert Kaufman (1976) notes about public agencies facing termination, '[t]hey are not helpless, passive pawns in the game of politics as it affects their lives; they are active, energetic, persistent participants' (p. 9). For IOs, Susan Strange (1998) even goes as far as to note that job security of IO bureaucrats is the main explanation why IOs 'never die' (title). Leonard Schuette (2024) equally notes that IOs

may go into a survival mode when threatened. Indeed, in moments of crises, when many things can happen in a short period of time, formal rules become more fluid and actors other than the formal power holders can decisively move in (also Stone, 2011; Kreuder-Sonnen, 2019).

An important condition for proactive behaviour by IO institutional actors is that they clearly understand that their organization is existentially challenged. This sounds obvious, but IOs do not always see problems coming until it is too late. We argue that IO leadership by Secretaries-General, Directors-General, and Executive Secretaries is a key variable (Kille & Scully, 2003; Hendrickson, 2006; Chesterman, 2007; Park & Weaver, 2012; see also Moravcsik, 1999). Particularly in crisis situations, there needs to be direction from the top. This starts with IO leaders recognizing the existential challenge and taking the lead of formulating a response. While some IO leaders will be more hands-on, skilled, and can rely on (personal) authority and networks or their public profile, others might not consider challenges existential until it is too late. Some existential challenges lead to acute crises, while others are more slow-burning or creeping (e.g. Boin, Ekengren, & Rhinard, 2020), which makes the recognition of existential crises less than guaranteed. Some IOs may have also experienced similar types of crises before and possess experience in how to address them.

Once institutional actors in IOs recognize existential challenges, the key question becomes how to respond. What we know from the study of IO agency and international public administration is that institutional actors have various ways to exert influence. Institutional actors have, for instance, discretion in policy implementation which states have delegated to institutional actors (Pollack, 2003; Hawkins et al., 2006). The literature also tells us that institutional actors facilitate deal-making between states (Beach 2004), increase the performance of IO programs (Heinzel & Liese, 2021), while influencing the outcomes of policy (Biermann & Siebenhüner,

2009; Eckhard & Ege, 2016; Ege, Bauer, & Wagner, 2021). IOs and their institutional actors have set up public communications offices (Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2018a, 2018b), adopted democratic narratives (Dingwerth, Schmidtke, & Weise, 2020), set up international parliamentary assemblies (Schimmelfennig et al., 2020), and have focused on improving their own degree of identity cohesion and hierarchy (Von Billerbeck, 2020).

It is useful to group these forms of IO agency along two dimensions in terms of response options. Institutional actors can help their IOs *adapt* to cope with existential challenges or try to *resist* and counter such pressures. Institutional actors can adopt, in this regard, both *behavioural* and *discursive* strategies (Tallberg & Zürn, 2019; Hirschmann, 2021; Heinkelmann-Wild & Jankauskas, 2022; see also Barnett & Coleman, 2005; Chorev, 2012; Kruck & Zangl, 2020). Institutional actors can, for instance, initiate reforms and facilitate compromise between the challenger states and the rest of the membership (adapt; behavioural). They can use agenda-setting or discretion in implementation to counter challenges and/or build coalitions with like-minded member states and non-state actors (resist; behavioural). They can use discursive strategies through their communication departments for issue framing and creating momentum for reform (adapt; discursive) or go on a public relations offensive in support of the legitimation of their organizations (resist; discursive). These are not mutually exclusive strategies. IOs can be accommodating in discourse but quietly resist behavioural change. Overall, institutional actors have a considerable toolkit available to cope with and counter existential challenges.

The empirical cases of this book provide powerful examples of such IO responses (see Table 1.1). The World Bank, for instance, adapted its lending portfolio following the creation of the China-led AIIB. It considered that as the AIIB focused on infrastructure, it should invest more

in human capital, norm-setting, and governance practices. The IEA initially resisted adaptation following the creation of the rival IRENA, but over time started to pay increasing attention to climate change through a layering strategy. The UNFCCC, when faced with U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, chose a different strategy. It focused on activating, and relying on, its large network of state and non-state actors supporting climate action. This large coalition strongly resisted the potential unravelling of the Paris Agreement through largely discursive actions aimed at the delegitimation of Trump. NATO institutional actors meanwhile leveraged the challenge posed by Trump to get the other allies to increase their defence spending, while quietly resisting Trump's demands for a rapprochement with Russia using backchannels throughout the U.S. government but also U.S. Congress.

Cases	Staff size	Existential challenge	Institutional response	Outcome
WTO	625	Trump blocks the (re)appointment of judges to Appellate Body	No response	Appellate Body becomes inoperable
World Bank	6800	China creates the AIIB as a rival institution	World Bank internally reforms and reaches out to the AIIB	World Bank adapts and remains the focal development bank
UNFCCC	450	Trump withdraws United States from the Paris Agreement	UNFCCC indirectly relies on external network	Recommitment of other states to the Paris Agreement

IEA	260*	Denmark, Germany, and Spain lead creation of IRENA as a rival institution focusing on renewable energy	IEA eventually engages with climate action through layering	IEA adapts its priorities towards climate action
NATO	1000**	Trump questions Article 5, demands increased defence spending and rapprochement towards Russia	NATO leverages challenges on defence spending while resisting Russia policy	NATO comes out unshattered and allies modestly increase defence spending
OSCE	616	EU develops competing crisis management operations as East-West relations deteriorate	Belated and limited response to adapt	OSCE divests from crisis management operations and declines

Table 1.1 Overview of case studies and empirical results.

Staff data are self-reported on websites, budgets and annual reports. These data including only staff at headquarters. * Data from Overland and Reischl (2018). ** NATO International Staff only

When comparing the empirical evidence, the cases also reveal great variation across the IOs in how their institutional actors responded to existential challenges. NATO and the World Bank actors provided the most proactive response among the six IOs studied in this book. NATO actors carefully crafted a strategy to respond to the challenge posed by Donald Trump using a combination of adaptive and resistance strategies through behavioural and discursive means. The World Bank not just adapted its lending in light of the creation of the AIIB, but also helped develop the AIIB through exchanging staff and engaging in joint projects. Two other IOs, the OSCE and the WTO, had much greater difficulty in responding to existential challenges. While the OSCE was developing crisis management missions during the 1990s, the emergence of the better resourced EU as a key crisis management actor from the mid-2000s meant that the OSCE had to divest in a context of rapidly deteriorating East-West relations. The WTO failed to respond when Donald Trump started blocking the appointment of judges to the Appellate Body, which rendered the Appellate Body inoperable.

What explains these varying responses by institutional actors to existential challenges? This book argues that we need to consider the *type of existential challenges* (Proposition 1) and particularly also the *abilities of institutional actors themselves* (Proposition 2). When it comes to direct challenges by powerful member states and indirect challenges where states act through competing institutions, we see considerable differences. Accommodating challenger states tends to be difficult for IOs (Walter, 2021; De Vries et al., 2021; Jurado et al., 2022). Powerful states are, of course, customers to be taken seriously, but their demands may erode the mandate of the IO or put a burden on the rest of the membership. Accordingly, we find that institutional actors approach direct existential challenges through behavioural resistance rather than adaptation strategies. While IO actors may want to placate challengers through discursive adaptation, in behavioural terms they are constrained. In the cases of WTO, UNFCCC, and

NATO, despite variation in the proactiveness of institutional actors, we generally find resistance to challenges from the United States and President Trump.

Indirect existential challenges, where powerful member states create new rival institutions to challenge incumbent IOs, on the other hand, are more likely to result in adaptation strategies. Ultimately institutional creation is a costly act by challenger states (Jupille, Mattli, & Snidal, 2013), aimed at the longer term. They often pursue institutional creation if other cheaper options (such as the reform of existing institutions) are unsatisfactory. Institutional creation is thus a clear signal that those states engaged in creating rival institutions mean business. It also raises questions of focality in international relations, that is which IOs are most central, and the distribution of scarce resources over IOs. Incumbent IOs likely want to get in on such action or at least protect their own organization from losing resources. What is more, once rival institutions have been established, it is normally too late for incumbent IOs to resist their creation. Openly competing with rival institutions is also likely self-defeating if the membership largely overlaps. In terms of our case studies, again to different degrees, we see indeed adaptation in the World Bank, IEA, and OSCE. The specific types of existential challenges therefore inform the calculations of institutional actors when they have to devise their responses (evidence for Proposition 1).

While the type of existential challenge is important, and institutional actors tailor their response accordingly, the constitution of the institutional actors themselves helps to explain the proactiveness and purposefulness of their responses. As noted above, institutional actors studied in the six cases of this book all have considerable bureaucratic resources (at least 250 staff members), yet this does not automatically result in careful strategic responses to existential challenges. The book analyses, in this respect, the leadership, organizational

structure, formal competences, and external networks of institutional actors as key institutional variables helping to explain responses (Proposition 2). Across the empirical cases, it finds that IO leadership is particularly important, not just in recognizing existential challenges but also in formulating and implementing consistent response strategies. It appears that the embeddedness in external networks can help institutional actors in terms of survival. A fragmented organizational structure can furthermore constrain strategic responses. Surprisingly, formal competences of institutional actors play a less important role.

Leadership by Secretaries-General, Directors-General, and Executive Secretaries is critical when dealing with existential challenges. The empirical cases of this book show that IOs strongly vary in terms of leadership and that this matters for strategic responses. The NATO case is particularly illustrative. Even before the inauguration of Donald Trump, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg lauded Trump for his ‘strong message’ on defence spending and pledged to ‘work with President Trump on how to adapt NATO’ (as cited in Nelson, 2017). Stoltenberg, as such, became one of the few international leaders to have a working relationship with Trump, which he used to the advantage of NATO. Another example of strong leadership was the case of the World Bank. The World Bank President Jim Yong Kim also understood from the beginning to challenge of the China-led AIIB to the Bank and developed a response accordingly. WTO Director General Roberto Azevedo, on the other hand, hardly engaged when the United States blocked the appointment of judges to the Appellate Body and when he did, in 2019, it was too late. The IEA similarly only started to adapt after the appointment of the new Executive Director Fatih Birol in 2015, which was six years after the creation of IRENA.

Leadership is thus overall important in recognizing the challenge and formulating a response strategy, but IO leaders should also be able to give direction to their bureaucracies and leverage all the available in-house resources. The organizational structure of institutional actors and the authority that IO leaders have internally varies, however, greatly (Elsig, 2011; Graham, 2014; Hall & Wood, 2018; Bayerlein et al., 2020). For institutional actors it matters whether they are integrated bureaucracies with clear reporting lines or a fragmented collection of directorates consisting of autonomous subunits. In the empirical cases, we find particularly that the WTO was constrained by its organizational structure in responding to the Appellate Body crisis. As an adjudication mechanism that should be insulated from state politics, the Appellate Body has its own secretariat, which is part of the WTO Secretariat, but not firmly under the authority of the Director-General. The organizational structure of the OSCE institutional actors was also kept decentralized by design with considerable autonomy for the different OSCE institutions and field operations. This constrained its responsiveness.

A key variable in the literature concerns the formal competences that institutional actors have and the levels of delegation (e.g. Tallberg, 2003, 2010; Hooghe et al., 2017). If institutional actors, for instance, have agenda-setting powers, they can propose to adapt or reform IOs in light of existential challenges. Across the empirical cases, however, the book only finds limited evidence for this. Of the six IOs, the WTO has formally the highest level of delegated powers and NATO the lowest level (Hooghe et al., 2017), yet NATO developed the most purposeful response and the WTO the least purposeful one. This also fits in with the argument made in informal governance that formal competences take a backseat in crises (e.g. Stone, 2011). The book nonetheless finds that the formal competences of institutional actors may (indirectly) set expectations and dictate appropriate behaviour. The NATO Secretary-General, for instance, formally chairs the North Atlantic Council. This not only allows the Secretary-General to call

for meetings and set the agendas, but it also means that the Secretary-General acts as the spokesperson for the Alliance and the everyone immediately looks to the Secretary-General for guidance. More generally, however, it is what IO leaders do in their positions and whether they actively lead in responding to existential challenges.

While institutional actors mostly facilitate the work of their IOs, some are also increasingly active outside the walls of their organizations. The embeddedness of institutional actors in external networks affects their ability to mobilize support in the environment surrounding IOs to counter existential challenges. Scholars have, for instance, pointed at orchestration, the use of non-state actors, and collusion with like-minded states (e.g. Abbott et al., 2015; Sending & Neumann, 2006; Tallberg et al., 2013; Dijkstra, 2017). The case studies also show empirically how such variation in external networks affects the ability of institutional actors to respond to existential challenges. Particularly UNFCCC institutional actors have been active in building a wide network of non-state and sub-state actors, which they could use when the United States withdrew from the Paris Agreement. But NATO actors also have strong external networks including in the U.S. State and Defense Departments, with senators and house representatives across the aisle, and the think tank community. Other institutional actors are notably much less strongly embedded in external networks, such as WTO and OSCE institutional actors, even if the OSCE did set up a modest external network of think tanks and academics.

The variation in leadership, organizational structure, and external networks therefore helps us to understand why institutional actors across different IOs formulated different responses to similar existential challenges (evidence for Proposition 2). The formal competences of institutional actors surprisingly play a lesser role. Overall, the book finds that institutional actors have potentially considerable agency when dealing with existential challenges.

Institutional actors, however, need to strategically choose within the range of available response options. Strategic responses do not come automatically to institutional actors even if they have sufficient bureaucratic resources. Particularly the quality of IO leadership is important and institutional actors tend to use different strategies depending on whether they are facing direct challenges by member states or indirect challenges through other competing institutions. To understand the survival of IOs, we therefore need to pay much more attention to IO leaders as well as the officials and bureaucrats that care for IOs every day.

1.4 The method

To sustain this argument, this book provides evidence from six comparative case studies across three different policy areas. For each of these case studies, the book traces the process from the moment that an existential challenge appears on the agenda, through the formulation and implementation of the response by the IO and its institutional actors, towards the outcome. The data used in this book comes from publicly available sources, but also from 114 original interviews with key policy officials and experts.

This book seeks to explain why institutional actors of IOs respond differently existential challenges. It is important to elaborate how we methodologically approach and operationalize existential challenges and institutional actors. To start with existential challenges, they have been defined above as those that specifically put individual IOs at risk of no longer being able to effectively carry out some of their core functions. The question therefore is how we know an existential challenge when we see one. Since the outcome is not predetermined—existential challenges may result in a negative outcome (dissolution in extremis) but may also be countered—we should avoid posthocism by reasoning backward (cf. Capoccia & Keleman,

2007 on critical junctures). At the same time, it is clear from the academic literature that the causes of existential challenges are often external to IOs, for instance when a war breaks out between two member states which subsequently results in less cooperation, and quite varied. Furthermore, some crises are acute and fast-burning while others are creeping (Boin et al., 2020) making it more difficult to determine when precisely creeping crisis becomes an existential challenge.

To address these methodological points, this book does not survey all sorts of problems (e.g. war and conflict, hegemonic transitions, economic downturns, domestic politics) that might potentially result in trouble for IOs. Instead, it stays closer to the IOs themselves and contestations that directly and indirectly affect them. It considers, in this respect, two types of existential challenges. The first type concerns direct contestation by a powerful state. Powerful states have outside alternatives to IOs, strong informal channels of influence within IOs as well as diplomatic and coercive means that they can deploy outside IOs. As one example of this type of direct contestation, we study in this book the Trump administration and ‘America First’ which not only questioned the effectiveness of many IOs and the distributive bargain, but also the very need for cooperation in the first place. The second type concerns indirect contestation by newly created competing IO. Newly competing IOs are often established by member states dissatisfied with the status quo in existing IOs (Morse & Keohane, 2014; Urpelainen & Van de Graaf, 2014). Competition is indirect in that newly created IOs draw on the same resources as the existing IOs and if they succeed in establishing themselves, it may result in a divestment by the incumbent IOs. These two types of existential challenges are further developed in the theoretical chapter, but by focusing on challenges related to IOs (rather than broader problems in international relations), this book can subsequently study how institutional actors in IOs respond.

The book furthermore only studies IOs where institutional actors have the potential to respond. If they do not have at least the potential, there is no sense in studying their responses. Institutional actors therefore need a substantial number of staff members. If IOs have only a very limited staff, it is unlikely that they can put forward purposeful behavioural or discursive responses to existential challenges. After all, staff is needed at the political and strategic level, but also in terms of facilitating policy-making, implementation, and press and public relations. The total number of staff members required is an empirical question. Debre and Dijkstra (2021a), for instance, show that IOs with as few as 50 staff members significantly survive longer than IOs with a smaller staff. They reason that IOs need at least a policy division and not just conference management, legal service, and translators to respond to existential challenges. In this book, we take a higher threshold of minimally 250 staff. According to the *Yearbook of International Organizations*, only 53 of the 534 IOs included in the *Correlates of War Intergovernmental Organizations v3* (COW-IGO) dataset have such a bureaucratic staff. We thus only empirically focus on the top 90th percentile of IOs in terms of staff.¹ These are most-likely IOs for our argument. If we do not find purposeful responses by institutional actors in such cases, we will not find them at all. This is not to say that institutional actors with 50-249 staff members, or even below 50 staff members, do not strategically respond to existential challenges, but simply that we look at some major case studies where strategic responses are most likely.

¹ Along similar lines, Hooghe et al. (2017) only study 78 IOs which have sufficient authority to make a genuinely independent contribution to international relations. Zürn et al. (2021) and Sommerer et al. (2022a, 2022b) only study respectively 34, 32, and 30 IOs. While all 534 IOs collectively make up a large part of global governance, a few dozen IOs are clearly the most important ones and worth studying separately. See on the termination of major IOs also Dijkstra and Debre (2022).

With these two points in mind, this book relies on comparative case studies across three policy areas (see Table 1.1 above for an overview). Case studies offer us the opportunity to provide in-depth analysis and also consider the all-important processes that take place behind the scenes in IOs. As such we can connect the dots and shed light on the important role of institutional actors and how they respond to existential challenges. At the same time, the comparative nature of our research—across six cases—allows to compare variation in how institutional actors to respond to existential challenges, providing us patterns as well as insight into the idiosyncrasies of individual challenges. Through a spread of IOs across three different policy areas (trade and development; climate and energy; security and defence), we are also in a good position to say something about IO responses across the full population of IOs across policy domains. IOs in the area of trade and development are typically considered more stable, institutionalized, and having higher degrees of authority, while IOs in security and defence are more-state driven reflecting sovereignty concerns. IOs in the domain of the environment, including climate and energy, tend to have more innovative designs based on a network structure.

This book studies six IOs that matter in international relations. The WTO and World Bank as two examples of trade and development IOs. The UNFCCC and the IEA as two IOs in the area of climate and energy. And NATO and the OSCE as examples of security and defence IOs. In line with the two types of existential challenges, we study first three IOs that have been targeted heavily through the ‘America First’ policies of the Trump administration. These include the WTO and its Appellate Body, the UNFCCC and its Paris Agreement, and NATO. Second, we study indirect challenges coming from competing IOs that draw on the same resources base. The three cases include the World Bank which got competition from the AIIB in infrastructure lending, the IEA whose mandate was challenged by IRENA, and the OSCE whose function in

common security was eroded by the developing EU crisis management policies in a context of deteriorating East-West relations.

In all of these cases, there were clear existential challenges as in the risk that these IOs would no longer be able to perform some of their core functions (e.g. adjudication, collective defence, infrastructure lending, crisis management operations, mitigating climate change), even if there was no immediate risk of outright dissolution in all the cases. The World Bank, for instance, would unlikely be dissolved as a result of the challenge of the AIIB, but clearly its primacy in development lending was being challenged. NATO and the UNFCCC survived the first term of President Trump, but this was not a given. Trump, for instance, refused to initially endorse Article 5 without which NATO has little meaning and seriously threatened and considered to leave the Alliance. He did withdraw the United States from the Paris Agreement. And even if this did not result in a cascade of further withdrawals (which previously happened with the Kyoto Protocol), it seriously set back climate action for years. In other words, each of the case studies analysed in this book clearly involved existential challenges. These were very serious events that undermined the health of these IOs and challenged their relevance to international relations, even if they did not automatically lead to dissolution.

For each case study we engage in process-tracing by chronologically studying the process from the beginning until the end. The process consists of three steps. First, we describe the existential challenge to the IO, which is also the starting point of the analysis. Second, we discuss in detail the response by the institutional actors to the challenge. We consider the type of response (adaptation/resistance and behavioural/discursive) and explain variation in the responses on the basis of the variables identified above. Finally, we briefly discuss the outcome of the existential challenge. In other words, we tell the whole story from start to finish while systematically

identifying our variables of interest. What we are after is to explain response strategies (as our dependent variable) based on the type of existential challenge and the features of the relevant institutional actors. The empirical ambition of the case studies is not necessarily to link the responses by IOs to eventual outcomes. While we generally do find an association between responses and outcomes, it remains difficult to make causal claims. The purpose of the book remains to study why do the institutional actors differently respond to existential challenges. The empirical focus of the book therefore is on the responses, not the outcomes.

In terms of empirical evidence, the book provides an in-depth analysis combining publicly available data from official documents, newspaper articles, policy reports, and secondary sources with data from 114 interviews conducted with IO officials, national diplomats and civil servants, representatives from non-state organizations, and (think tank) experts. While elite interviews are not without their problems, they also present a unique source of data to get a sense of the processes that play behind the scenes. They help us to connect dots and point at the most salient moments in a process. The interviewees have been carefully selected, mostly based on their functions, and most interviews lasted an hour. The starting point of the interviews was normally about the moment that the existential challenge appeared on the radar of the interviewee (as in a semi-structured interview). We then let the interview run its course following up on the responses of the interviewee to gain rich empirical data and avoiding steering the interviewee in the direction of our research question (as in an unstructured interview). Due to the pandemic, most interviews were conducted via videoconference. The interviews were conducted entirely in line with the ethics requirements of our university ethics board.² The interview data are pseudonymous (we know the identity of the interviewees, but

² Approval by Maastricht University Ethical Review Committee Inner City Faculties (ERCIC) on 18 October 2018 and 19 December 2019 (reference: ERCIC_098_01_10_2018). Approval by European Research Council (ERC) Ethics Review on 25 October 2018 (reference: Ares(2018)5481894) and 24 March 2020 (reference: Ares(2020)1725290).

they are not revealed for reasons of confidentiality) and a complete list of pseudonymous interviewees has been included at the back of the book.

In this book we therefore link the types of challenges and the characteristics of the institutional actors to their response strategies in six case studies informed by rich empirical data. The book, however, does more than simply providing six empirical episodes of IOs that were existentially challenges. Unique is also the comparative set up. Throughout the book it becomes clear that the comparison across the different IOs provides us with useful benchmarks to understand the varied responses of institutional actors. By comparing and contrasting the different types of challenges, institutional features, and responses, we can also better position individual cases. We compare the case studies within their respective chapters, create linkages between the empirical chapters, and return to the comparison of all findings in the conclusion.

1.5 The book

The remainder of the book consists of five chapters. The next chapter 2 provides the theoretical framework and outlines an institutional theory of IO responses. Chapters 3-5 provide six case studies. These chapters are organized along policy areas. Chapter 3 includes IOs in the field of trade and development (WTO; World Bank). Chapter 4 focuses on climate and energy (UNFCCC; IEA). Chapter 5 studies security and defence IOs (NATO; OSCE). Chapter 6 concludes comparing all the findings and discussing implications for our understanding of the crisis and survival of IOs.

Chapter 2 sets out the theoretical framework for this book. The first part of the chapter discusses on the different types of existential challenges that IOs may face. It distinguishes in this respect

between powerful member states directly challenging IOs and other competing IOs indirectly challenging the IO resources base. The chapter continues detailing the possible responses by IO institutional actors to these existential challenges. It identifies IO responses that focus on adaptation and/or resistance through both discursive and behavioural strategies. The chapter then discusses whether IOs and their institutional actors have such response options at their disposal. It points at the importance of IO resources, such as a sizeable bureaucracy, but also at how IO resources can be used to formulate and implement response strategies to existential challenges. It identifies the institutional features of leadership, structure, formal competences, and external networks. The chapter concludes by considering the outcomes for IOs as a result of existential challenges.

Chapters 3-5 provide the six empirical case studies of IO responses to existential challenges. These empirical chapters are organized by policy area and as such cover a wide spectrum of IOs. The chapters are structured similarly. Chapter 3, which has a focus on trade and development, starts by analysing the existential challenge that the Trump administration posed to the WTO Appellate Body. Following his election as president, Donald Trump almost immediately started to block the (re)appointment of judges to the Appellate Body, which he accused of judicial overreach. The chapter shows that no serious response was formulated by WTO institutional actors. They lacked political leadership to give direction and the organization was hampered by its fragmented structure. The outcome was that the Appellate Body became inoperable. As a second case study, Chapter 3 studies the existential challenge of the creation of the China-led AIIB to the World Bank. The response by the institutional actors in the World Bank was markedly different from those in the WTO. The World Bank leadership almost immediately recognized the challenge and adapted its operations, welcoming constructive relations with the new AIIB to ensure that development standards were met at this

new institution. Over time, both IOs established a considerable number of joint projects and exchanged staff.

Chapter 4 focuses on a different policy area: climate and energy. The first case study is about the existential challenge that the Trump administration posed to the UNFCCC by withdrawing from the Paris Agreement. The fear within the climate community was that further states would also withdraw. Rather than responding to U.S. withdrawal, the UNFCCC therefore set out to prevent further withdrawals by activating its large network of like-minded state and non-state actors in support for climate action. The outcome was that not another state withdrew from the Paris Agreement and that the Agreement was strongly re-legitimated. When President Biden took office, the United States could simply rejoin that Agreement which had been kept alive. Chapter 4 furthermore studies the case of the IEA, which had been accused of not doing enough to tackle climate change, and which was existentially challenged through the creation of IRENA. While the challenge was clear, it took a while for the IEA to respond. It was only with the arrival of the new Executive Director Fatih Birol in 2015 that IEA started adapting by including climate change much more prominently in its activities.

The final empirical Chapter 5 focuses on the policy area of security and defence. It starts by analysing the existential challenge posed by President Trump to NATO. It shows that while Trump was on the brink of announcing the United States withdrawal from NATO, institutional actors around Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg worked hard to discursively placate Trump, selling increases in defence spending by allies as victories for him, while quietly resisting his demands for rapprochement with Russia. NATO, as such, came out relatively unshattered. Chapter 5 also studies the case of the OSCE and how it had to adjust to the increasing prominence of the EU in the area of security and deteriorating East-West relations. It finds that the OSCE,

which was upgraded in 1995, deployed a considerable amount of crisis management missions during the 1990s. When the EU, a better resourced regional organization, started to develop its own crisis management operations during the mid-2000s, this challenged the role of the OSCE. Simultaneously, the OSCE and its human dimension was challenged by Russia. As the EU took over field operations and expanded its membership, the gridlocked OSCE closed many of its field activities and is on a serious pathway of decline.

Chapter 6 concludes this book. It starts by restating the research question and argument of the book. It then compares and discusses the research findings of the six case studies. It highlights that institutional actors can proactively respond to existential challenges and tailor their responses, but much depends on how they leverage their resources. They do not always recognize the challenge, which requires political leadership. We also point at the importance of a clear organizational structure as well as embedding in external networks. Based on these comparative findings, the book considers the broader implications for academic research on IOs and their survival.

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