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# Donald Trump and the survival strategies of international organisations: when can institutional actors counter existential challenges?

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**Abstract** *The Trump administration posed an unprecedented challenge to many international organisations (IOs). This article analyses the ability of IOs to respond and explains variation in the survival strategies pursued by their institutional actors. It argues that leadership, organisational structure, competences and external networks affect whether institutional actors can formulate and implement responses to existential challenges. Providing evidence from the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and World Trade Organisation (WTO), this article shows how institutional actors varied in their ability to pursue survival strategies toward Trump. NATO officials publicly leveraged the Trump challenge on burden-sharing while quietly shielding the alliance from Trump on Russia policy. UNFCCC officials considered United States withdrawal from the Paris Agreement to be inevitable and focused on preventing further withdrawals through coalitions with non-state actors. WTO officials lacked the leadership and organisational structure to formulate a strategic response.*

## Introduction

Donald Trump's "America First" approach was one of the biggest challenges to the liberal international order since the end of the Cold War. Under his administration, the United States (US) left the Paris Agreement on climate change, reneged on the Iran nuclear deal, quit the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), set in motion a process of exiting the World Health Organisation (WHO), obstructed the appointment of the new Director-General for the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and blocked judges for its Appellate Body, sanctioned the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and put the future of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in serious doubt.

There is no shortage of scholarship discussing this populist assault on the liberal international order and international organisations (IOs) in particular

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(Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019; Lake, Martin, and Risse 2021; De Vries, Hobolt, and Walter 2021). America First presented an acute crisis for IOs as the most powerful state questioned both the need for international cooperation and the capability of IOs to supply it. In contrast, we know less about how IOs and their institutional actors—IO leaders and their bureaucracies—have tried to cope with and counter existential challenges. This is surprising as IOs are typically considered long-lasting institutions and their bureaucracies have a key interest in their survival (Keohane 1984; Strange 1998; Ikenberry 1999; Chorev 2012; Jupille, Mattli, and Snidal 2013). To better understand the state of the crisis of the liberal international order and IOs, we should therefore not only consider the challengers but also their defenders. This article therefore analyses to what extent the institutional actors of IOs had the ability to formulate a response and fend off the challenge posed by Trump.

This article argues that not all IOs have similar abilities to respond to contestation. Institutional actors within IOs may not recognise the challenge and the corresponding need to formulate a strategy, or have the prowess to implement a response. Even if they have considerable resources, much depends on the strength of their leadership, organisational structure, formal competences and external networks. Providing evidence from three IOs and 67 interviews, this article shows that different IOs varied in their ability to pursue survival strategies during the Trump administration. NATO officials publicly leveraged the challenge to increase burden-sharing among allies while quietly shielding the alliance from Trump's position on Russia. Officials from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) considered US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement to be inevitable and focused on preventing further withdrawals through coalitions with non-state actors. WTO officials lacked leadership and organisational structure to formulate a response and did little to save the Appellate Body from becoming defunct.

These findings provide new insights on the resilience of IOs. At a theoretical level, we are only starting to understand IO responses to existential challenges (cf. Strange 1998; Gray 2018; Debre and Dijkstra 2021; Morais de Sa e Silva 2021; Hirschmann 2021; Dijkstra and Debre 2022). This article opens up the “black box” of IO responses to contestation by paying careful attention to the varying abilities of institutional actors to stand up for the survival of their organisations. As such, this article adds to the literature on international public administration (Knill and Bauer 2016; Eckhard and Ege 2016), which is thus far restricted to IO responses to external pressures on policy questions (Chorev 2012; see also Barnett and Coleman 2005; Weaver 2008) rather than existential challenges. Empirically, the article contributes to how IOs have responded to contestation by the US. Most research on IO responses to contestation, including by the American president, remains based on single case studies. Hopewell (2021a, 2021b) and Zaccaria (2022), for instance, focus on the WTO, while Sperling and Webber (2019) and Schuette (2021a) gauge NATO responses. Comparative analyses, however, are rare (Heinkelmann-Wild and Jankauskas 2022; Kruck et al. 2022).

This article starts by outlining why institutional actors are important to the survival of IOs and may have the ability to strategically respond. It continues with three case studies on burden-sharing and Russia policy in NATO, the

Paris Agreement of the UNFCCC and the appointment of judges to the WTO Appellate Body. The conclusion compares the findings and reflects on their implications for the study of IOs more broadly.

### Ability of IO actors to respond to existential challenges

It has long been established that IO institutional actors—IO leaders and their bureaucracies—have agency. Most research tends to distinguish between executive heads of IOs such as Secretary-Generals or Director-Generals, whose agency is based on political leadership (e.g. Kille and Scully 2003; Hall and Woods 2018; Heinzel 2022), and the agency of civil servants as part of the international public administration (e.g. Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Biermann and Siebenhüner 2009; Eckhard and Ege 2016). When we speak of institutional actors, we therefore combine both strands of literature on political leadership and bureaucratic agency. We know in this respect how institutional actors develop their IOs over time, expand their scope, engage in policy-making, but also how they sometimes implement policies at odds with their mandates. In this article, we focus instead on existential challenges, which potentially trigger different IO behaviours. We define existential challenges as challenges that put IOs at risk of *no longer being able to effectively carry out some of their core functions*. Existential challenges may result in dissolution (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2020; Debre and Dijkstra 2021), but may also turn IOs into “zombies” by rendering core function(s) obsolete and/or limiting their relevance to international relations (Gray 2018; Debre and Dijkstra 2022).

Existential challenges to IOs come in many different shapes and forms and Donald Trump and his administration posed a particular kind of challenge. Uniquely, he questioned both the *demand for cooperation* (with his focus on “America First” and his general denial of cross-border cooperation problems) and the *supply of cooperation* by IOs (by accusing them of inefficiencies) (cf. Keohane 1982; Dijkstra and Debre 2022). This was more fundamental than other types of contestations that focus on either the demand or supply sides of cooperation, for instance states demanding stronger representation or pressure groups demanding different policy outcomes. Furthermore, while the origins of Trumpism remain a matter of debate and while international cooperation has long said to be in gridlock (Hale, Held, and Young 2013) and left behind the era of “permissive consensus” (Hooghe and Marks 2009), the challenge posed by Donald Trump to IOs posed an *acute crisis* rather than a creeping crisis with a long “incubation time” (‘t Hart and Boin 2001; Boin, Ekengren, and Rhinard 2021). America First triggered a sense of emergency for IOs which opened opportunities for exceptional behaviour (cf. Kreuder-Sonnen 2019).

The most striking aspect of the existential challenge posed by Donald Trump and his administration was the fact that it came from the country which had been most important in setting up the postwar international institutions and had supported them throughout the decades as a *hegemon*, but was now challenging the foundations of liberal international order. This challenge “from within” (Heinkelmann-Wild, Kruck, and Daßler 2021; cf. Kruck et al. 2022) was not just a surprise when considering how international institutions are generally seen as a continuation of American power (Ikenberry 2001), but being openly contested by the most powerful state in the international system

also presents a formidable challenge for any IO. In other words, Donald Trump was a unique character, but his policy of America First presented a key assault on IOs by a hegemonic power and challenged both the need for cooperation and the ability of IOs to supply it.

This challenge by Donald Trump and the general crisis of liberal order is well-documented in the literature, but we also know that international institutions (including IOs) tend to be sticky despite existential challenges (Keohane 1984; Strange 1998; Ikenberry 1999; Chorev 2012; Jupille, Mattli, and Snidal 2013; Dijkstra and Debre 2022). Some member states benefit from the cooperation facilitated by IOs and risk losses as a result of the challenges posed by Trump. In addition institutional actors are likely to fight for survival (Strange 1998). The combination of institutional actors and supporting member states can present a powerful coalition.<sup>1</sup> As Kaufman (1976, 9) 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'. Indeed, Gray (2018) and Debre and Dijkstra (2021) show that the autonomy and staff size of institutional actors affect the longevity of IOs. Yet even with such latent resources, a strategic response is not a given (Chorev 2012, 28–41). Institutional actors should be able to recognise the challenge on time, pick an appropriate strategic response out of a range of available options, and implement the response. This is a tall order as bureaucracies often incline towards inertia (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Weaver 2008; Bayerlein, Knill, and Steinebach 2020). It is thus important to further investigate the *ability* of institutional actors to change their fortunes.

There are many potential response options. As a starting point it is critical to distinguish between the responses by IOs as a whole and the responses by the institutional actors within those IOs. With regard to the level of IOs, Hirschmann (2021) usefully notes that IOs can try to *adapt* and give in to the demands of contesting actors or try to *resist* these pressures and increase their resilience (or do nothing due to inertia). Adaptation and resistance can be done through *behavioural* and *discursive* strategies (Hirschmann 2021; Tallberg and Zürn 2019; Heinkelmann-Wild and Jankauskas 2022). When we combine adaptation and resistance with the behavioural and discursive strategies, we can usefully identify four types of survival strategies. Importantly, these different survival strategies are however not mutually exclusive. IOs can be accommodating and sympathetic in public but quietly resist meaningful behavioural change. Furthermore, IOs can adapt in some issue areas, while resisting pressures for change in other issue areas.

It is worth presenting the tools that underpin these four types of survival strategies at the level of the institutional actors themselves. Institutional actors can initiate reforms and facilitate compromise between the contesting state and the rest of the member states (*adapt; behavioural*). They can use their formal competences, such as agenda management and policy implementation, and/or build coalitions with like-minded member states and non-state actors (*resist;*

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<sup>1</sup> Responses by other member states are important, but they often take their cues from the institutional actors and work in tandem with institutional actors (see also further below on networks). See for instance Walter (2021), Jurado, León, and Walter (2022) and Schuette (2021b) on Brexit, and particularly the NATO and UNFCCC empirical case studies later.

*behavioural*). They can use discursive strategies, including through public relations (PR) departments, to placate contesting states (*adapt; discursive*) or frame issues and engage in public relations (*resist; discursive*). Institutional actors thus play a central role in IO responses (Hirschmann 2021; Tallberg and Zürn 2019; Heinkelmann-Wild and Jankauskas 2022; Ecker-Ehrhardt 2018; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2021). Among these options, there are trade-offs that need to be weighed. Walter and her co-authors (De Vries, Hobolt, and Walter 2021; Jurado, León, and Walter 2022), for instance, suggest an “accommodation dilemma” where IOs need to be considerate to demands by powerful member states while attending to contradictory demands by other member states and ensuring that cooperation does not erode.

While the existing literature has usefully pointed at the range of potential response options for institutional actors within IOs, it has insufficiently considered that not all options may be available to all institutional actors. This article indeed argues that institutional actors *vary in their ability* to pursue survival strategies. We need to consider the strengths and characteristics of the institutional actors themselves to understand different responses to the Trump challenge. We rely, in this respect, on key explanations that are widely present in the literature (cf. Biermann and Siebenhüner 2009; Abbott et al. 2015; Tallberg et al. 2013; Hooghe et al. 2017). We consider the institutional actors and their structure, their position within their IOs, and their position outside IOs. We study four variables: the strength of *leadership* of institutional actors (cross-cutting), the degree of centralisation in the *organisational structure* (within institutional actors), *formal competences* of institutional actors (within the IO), and the strength of *external networks* of institutional actors (outside the IO). These four variables provide a comprehensive picture of the ability of institutional actors to respond: in the absence of all four, a strategic response is unlikely; with their presence, institutional actors are likely to craft a survival strategy. If institutional actors score high on some variables and low on others, they are likely to have a limited range of available survival strategies.

Institutional actors need *leadership* to recognise challenges and formulate and implement responses. Leaders fulfil multiple roles: within the institutional actors themselves, within their IO and toward the external world (Mathiason 2007, 76–82). Biermann and Siebenhüner (2009, 344) find that strong leaders, defined as ‘charismatic, visionary, and popular, as well as flexible and reflexive’ correlate with autonomous external influence across nine environmental case studies. Leadership is not guaranteed and institutional actors across virtually all IOs have seen stronger and weaker leadership (e.g. Kille and Scully 2003; Hendrickson 2006; Chesterman 2007; Park and Weaver 2012; see also Moravcsik 1999). Hall and Woods (2018) show that IO leaders face considerable constraints, including legal-political, bureaucratic and resources constraints. IO leaders also vary in how they maintain external relations (Gronau and Schmidtke 2016, 542–546). With strong leadership therefore, institutional actors are more likely to make pro-active choices about survival strategies. Leadership also allows for behavioural strategies, such as creating compromise among the membership to adapt or resist challenges, as well as discursive strategies through public responses and framing. Without strong leadership, survival strategies by institutional actors are more likely *post hoc* and inconsistent, if at all present.

The *organisational structure* concerns the bureaucracies of institutional actors themselves. Only when institutional actors can strategically leverage the full weight of their resources (including budgets and staff) are they able to withstand existential pressures. Institutional actors are oftentimes complex agents (Elsig 2011). Graham (2014), for instance, shows that fragmentation within the WHO helps to explain performance: the ‘WHO headquarters in Geneva did not control its regional or country office hinterlands’ (p. 367; cf. Bayerlein, Knill, and Steinebach 2020). At the same time, organisational structures can also be designed to promote responsiveness. Schuette (2021b) details how the European Commission set up a high-level task force on top of its regular bureaucracy to provide a strong response to Brexit. Biermann and Siebenhüner (2009, 341–342) highlight hierarchical flexibility and structures for institutional learning. It thus matters whether institutional actors have integrated bureaucracies with clear reporting lines or a fragmented collection of autonomous units. Particularly in crisis situations, command and control is important. We expect that a responsive organisational structure enables survival strategies, whereas a fragmented structure will limit strategies due to internal resistance. The organisational structure can, in this respect, facilitate or inhibit behavioural adaptation strategies and also affect the effectiveness of bureaucratic resistance strategies.

*Formal competences* are a starting point to understand what institutional actors can achieve within the IO (e.g. Hooghe et al. 2017). While various scholars have shown that institutional actors also develop authority beyond formal competences (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; see also Hurd 1999; Liese et al. 2021), formal competences are important for institutional actors when addressing existential challenges. If institutional actors have agenda-setting powers (Tallberg 2003, 2010), they cannot only put forward proposals for behavioural adaptation, but are also more likely expected to spearhead responses to challengers. Not all competences are relevant. Of interest are the opportunities that institutional actors have in the policy-process to pursue their survival strategies; whether they have institutional ways to help the organisation adapt to new realities or resisting pressures on the IO. In the case of limited formal competences however, we expect that institutional actors will develop a more muted survival strategy or no strategy at all, since they have not been given the authority to respond for the IO.

The embeddedness of institutional actors in *external networks* affects their ability to mobilise support in the environment surrounding IOs.<sup>2</sup> Dijkstra (2017) notes that institutional actors rarely have sufficient authority to take on major member states, such as the US and Trump. Yet they can rely on support beyond the immediate walls of their institutions. They have a central position and are often the main contact point for external actors, which they may orchestrate into supporting their survival strategies (Abbott et al. 2015; Hale and Roger 2014; Hickmann and Elsässer 2020). There are a variety of different actors that institutional actors can potentially rely on. First, they can engage the help of other (major) states which can be co-opted into a united front.

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<sup>2</sup> The boundaries of IOs are not always clear as many actors surround IOs. We focus here on mobilizing support from actors outside the context of the plenary meetings and executive bodies of IOs.

Second, they can engage with domestic actors within the US itself, including like-minded actors in the government, Congress and sub-state actors. Third, they can make strategic use of non-governmental organisations which have increasing access to IOs (Sending and Neumann 2006; Tallberg et al. 2013). IOs and their institutional actors do vary in their degree of permeability (Hawkins and Jacoby 2006). We expect that institutional actors with a strong external network will focus on building a coalition in the surroundings of the IO, whereas IOs lacking a network will be more constrained and circumspect in their survival strategies.

Institutional actors have considerable agency when dealing with existential challenges. While the key role played by international actors is recognised, it is less clear *when* these institutional actors can craft convincing survival strategies. Institutional actors need to strategically choose within the range of available options. This section has highlighted four variables, including the strength and characteristics of the leadership, organisational structure, formal competences and options to mobilise support, all of which are likely to affect the IO's available survival strategies. The remainder of this article analyses how these variables affected the ability of institutional actors to respond to the America First challenge by Trump.

### **Research design and methodology**

As noted in the introduction, Trump and his administration represented a challenge to many IOs. This article studies and compares three case studies. NATO, UNFCCC and WTO are prominent and task-specific IOs with relatively narrow scopes (collective defence, climate action and free trade, respectively) (Hooghe et al. 2017).<sup>3</sup> This makes it straightforward to identify existential challenges that put core functions at risk. All three IOs faced an existential challenge, the outcomes of which were not predetermined. Indeed, the challenges posed by Trump against these three IOs were among the strongest against any IO. He repeatedly threatened to pull out of them, actively questioned their rationale, and undermined their operations. Trump was close to leaving NATO and refused to endorse Article 5 on collective defence, withdrew the US from the Paris Agreement, and rendered the WTO Appellate Body inoperable. Against the definition of existential challenge, there was clearly a risk for all three IOs to the extent that they could no longer carry out some of their core functions. By comparing these case studies, we seek to come to more generalisable insights because as noted, Trump also challenged other IOs such as the ICC, UNESCO and the WHO.

For each case study, we first identify the challenge posed by Trump and his administration before analysing how (if at all) the institutional actors responded to the existential challenges. Subsequently, we discuss the four variables (leadership, organisational structure, formal competences and external

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<sup>3</sup> Hooghe et al. (2017) distinguish between task-specific IOs with a narrow scope and general purpose IOs with a wide scope. NATO and the WTO have a mandate that covers, respectively 2/25 and 3/25 coded policy areas, which makes them very narrow in scope. Hooghe et al. (2017) do not include the UNFCCC, but the UNFCCC likewise only covers 3/25 coded policies (environment; development; research).



network) to see how they affected the menu of options that institutional actors had at their disposal for formulating and implementing a survival strategy. We show, in this respect, significant variation across the cases: While NATO institutional actors score high on each of the variables, the institutional actors of the WTO score low, with the institutional actors of the UNFCCC scoring somewhere in the middle. The comparative analysis therefore allows us to highlight variation in the ability of institutional actors to formulate and implement responses to Trump.

Data for the four variables are available from official documents and publicly available sources as well as the secondary literature. To analyse precisely how institutional actors responded to Trump and how responses were conditioned by these four variables, our empirical analysis is based on 67 interviews with staff from the secretariats of these IOs, key member state officials (including from the Trump administration) and experts (conducted between March 2020 and April 2021). The list of interviews is included in the online appendix. Interviewees were selected largely on the basis of their official functions. Interviews were semi-structured in that respondents were asked to revisit the existential challenge posed by Trump and subsequently provide a step-by-step account of the response by the institutional actors. These interview data were triangulated with official documents, newspaper articles, policy reports and the secondary literature. From the interview data we also link the different variables to the survival strategies chosen.

The purpose is thus to highlight variation in the ability of institutional actors to respond, not to link responses by institutional actors to eventual outcomes for IOs. While we witness a strong correlation between the actions of the institutional actors and the fate of their IOs (NATO has survived Trump; the UNFCCC has contained the damage; the WTO Appellate Body remains defunct), it is not always straightforward to measure the exact causal influence of institutional actors. After all, they may use indirect channels via their external networks or opt for subtle influence. The analysis therefore focuses on the variation in the ability of institutional actors to formulate and implement survival strategies.

## **Institutional actors and IO responses to Donald Trump**

### *NATO: burden-sharing and Russia*

Trump's contestation of NATO posed an existential challenge questioning both the demand for NATO and the supply of collective defence by NATO. First, Trump advocated rapprochement with Russia under President Putin, while NATO had recently undergone significant reforms to implement a more robust defence and deterrence policy (Tardy 2021). Essentially, he therefore challenged the very rationale of the alliance and stressed that China should rather be the target. Second, he questioned NATO's and the allies' abilities to deliver collective defence due to their lack of defence spending and freeriding on the US. He demanded that allies 'pay up, including for past deficiencies, or they have to get out. And if that breaks up NATO, it breaks up NATO' (Trump 2016) and was indeed close to announcing withdrawal in 2018. Faced with these twin challenges, NATO institutional actors, including Secretary-General

Jens Stoltenberg (2014–), implemented an astute survival strategy. NATO institutional actors offered overt support for Trump's demands for greater burden-sharing (*behavioural* and *discursive adaptation*), while resisting his calls for rapprochement with Russia (*behavioural resistance*). These strategies succeeded in eventually winning over Trump on burden-sharing and helped prevent Trump from diluting NATO's posture toward Russia (Table 1).

In terms of *leadership*, NATO benefitted from Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg as a former Norwegian Prime Minister (Hendrickson 2014; Schuette 2021a). He was well-connected, with greater authority than the usual IO leaders and also widely perceived as a trusted broker without a personal agenda (Interviews #A2, #A7, #A11, #A12, #A18). Stoltenberg's deputy, Rose Gottemoeller (2016–2019) was a former US Under Secretary in the State Department with extensive connections in Washington. The NATO International Staff, which employs around 1000 officials and has a dedicated Public Diplomacy Division and Policy Planning Unit, furthermore presents a hierarchical *organisational structure* that answers to the political leadership. The Secretary-General possesses furthermore important *agenda-setting powers* as he chairs the North Atlantic Council and organises NATO summits (NATO 2011, 70). As the increasingly prominent public face of the alliance, the Secretary General also tends to receive significant media attention and can therefore shape public debates.

While NATO is not known for its openness to non-state actors, it is the central organisation for the collective defence of most allies. As a result, NATO institutional actors are well-connected and have strong *external networks*. The view among non-White House actors in the US and other allies toward NATO was also favourable. Powerful member states such as Germany or the United Kingdom viewed Trump's attacks on NATO in dismay and supported Stoltenberg's survival strategy, even when he publicly criticised some European allies for underspending on defence (Interviews #A5, #A15). Furthermore, NATO could rely on strong support from within the US Congress, State Department, Congress, National Security Council as well as non-governmental actors such as influential think tanks (Interviews #A3, #A7, #A17, #A20). The US public also remained in favour of continued US membership of the alliance (Pew 2020).

On the challenge of burden-sharing, which related directly to the delivery of collective defence by NATO, institutional actors had to walk the fine line of simultaneously pushing allies to invest more while selling even moderate increases in defence budgets as success back to Trump. The Secretary-General adopted, in this respect, a strategy that pushed for *behavioural adaptation* by the other allies while using a simultaneous strategy of *discursive adaptation* to placate Trump. The Secretary-General tailored his simplistic and servile communication style to flatter the egocentric Trump. Prior to Trump's inauguration, Stoltenberg lauded Trump for his 'strong message' on defence spending, pledging to 'work with President Trump on how to adapt NATO' (Stoltenberg 2017a). Appeasing Trump seemed to be the purpose of Stoltenberg's visit to the White House in May 2018, when he thanked the US President for his 'leadership ... on the issue of defence spending [which] has really helped to make a difference' (Stoltenberg 2018a). In 2019, the Secretary-General repeatedly noted that '[b]efore they were cutting billions. Now they are adding

**Table 1.** Variation in leadership, organisational structure, competences and external networks of institutional actors (variables), and survival strategies (outcome) across the cases

	NATO	UNFCCC	WTO
<i>Strength of leadership of the institutional actor</i>	Secretary General is a former prime minister	Executive Secretary is a career diplomat	Director-General was a career diplomat (resigned in 2020)
<i>Organizational structure of the institutional actor</i>	Hierarchical secretariat under the full authority of the Secretary-General with different substantive divisions	Treaty secretariat with an original focus on conference management, but also programme divisions	Supportive secretariat for the Councils. Appellate Body secretariat not integrated in main secretariat
<i>Competences of the institutional actor</i>	Strong agenda-setting competences	Facilitating the Conferences of the Parties and act as a hub for information and expertise	Facilitating decision-making
<i>Strength of the external network of the institutional actor</i>	Strong network to key personalities from both US political parties in State and Defence Departments and US Congress	Strong network with sub- and non-state actors in the US developed after first failure of Kyoto protocol and Copenhagen summit	Limited support in US
<i>Survival strategies</i>	Pro-active response by institutional actors through adaptation (behavioural and discursive) on burden-sharing and resistance (behavioural) on Russia	Indirect response by relying on pre-existing external network with focus on resistance (behavioural and discursive)	No purposeful response

billions. By the end of next year, that figure will rise to one hundred billion' (Stoltenberg 2019a). He appeared on Trump's favourite US news channel, *Fox*, crediting Trump for an 'extra \$100 billion' allies will have added to their defence spending (*Fox* 2019).

The Secretary-General also used agenda-setting tactics as summit chair to, for instance, turn a working meeting on Ukraine and Georgia during the 2018 summit into an impromptu crisis meeting on burden-sharing to appease Trump. The NATO leadership also used backroom diplomacy and their good connections to Germany to agree on a new funding formula for NATO's budget that saw Germany match the US contributions. This was largely symbolic, but it allowed Stoltenberg to publicly tout another victory for Trump. In sum, Stoltenberg's astute leadership aided by important procedural powers and support from other allies proved critical in placating Trump (Interviews #A5, #A6, #A13), who eventually reversed his position and expressed satisfaction with the way NATO had responded to his demands (Trump 2019). There were limits to behavioural adaptation by the other allies, but Stoltenberg worked tirelessly to facilitate the cooperation between Trump and the allies and used strong discursive strategies.

NATO institutional actors could not support Trump's demands for rapprochement with Russia, which would have subverted the very purpose of the alliance. To elude frustrating Trump, the NATO leadership set out to subtly resist his demands by means of shielding Russia policy from him and building coalitions with supportive third parties. This strategy of *behavioural resistance* was not matched with *discursive resistance*. Indeed, the Secretary-General avoided talking about Russia in Trump's presence. In the press conferences or remarks following their six bilateral meetings between April 2017 and December 2019, Stoltenberg always emphasised the need for greater defence spending, but he did not mention Russia policy in three of the press conferences, while in the others he only addressed Russia cursorily (see White House 2019; Stoltenberg 2017b, 2018b, 2019b, 2019c). Drawing on the power as summit organisers, NATO actors together with US diplomats also pressured allies to agree on the 2018 summit declaration, which featured several initiatives on Russia, prior to the actual summit to prevent Trump from derailing the agreement (Interviews #A3, #A9, #A10, #A17, #A19).

NATO actors also cultivated relations with like-minded actors to generate domestic pressure on Trump and to circumvent his direct involvement on Russia policy. One interviewee confirms that there were consistent backchannels between Stoltenberg's office and supportive US officials in the Pentagon and National Security Council coordinate policy and shield NATO (Russia policy) from Trump as much as possible (Interview #A17). Defense Secretary Mattis was a particularly strong supporter of NATO's Russia policy and became the institutional actor's main point of contact (Interviews #A3, #A7, #A20). Throughout Trump's term in office, the Secretary General also cultivated relations with US parliamentarians, regularly hosting them in Brussels, and speaking in front of both Houses of Congress. In January 2019, Congress went as far as to pass the NATO Support Act, prohibiting Trump to use federal funds to withdraw the US from NATO, and also steadily increased the US budgetary allocation for the US defence posture in Europe (the European Deterrence Initiative).

NATO institutional actors benefited from strong *leadership*, a clear *organisational structure*, agenda-setting *competences* and *networks* with external actors. This provided them the ability to craft and implement a successful survival strategy tailored to the specific challenges on Trump of specific issues. By the end of his tenure, Trump had embraced NATO as serving a ‘great purpose’ (White House 2019). NATO thus came out of the Trump presidency relatively unshattered. President Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken furthermore went to great lengths at the beginning of their terms to stress the importance of the transatlantic partnership. The transatlantic unity and response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 with strong NATO coordination, weapons deliveries, increased defence spending and various deterrence measures presents in this respect also a good benchmark to consider the counterfactual of what could have happened if either Trump had followed through on NATO, or even if he had been elected a two-term President.

#### *UNFCCC: the Paris Agreement*

The US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement took no one by surprise. After all, Trump had called global warming a ‘hoax’, announcing that he would ‘cancel’ the Paris Agreement during the election campaign (Betsill 2017; Bomberg 2017). Trump’s America First policy, in this respect, objected to both the rationale for cooperation as well as the compromise of the Paris Agreement with an ‘unfair’ economic burden placed on the US ‘while imposing no meaningful obligations on the world’s [other] leading polluters’ (Trump 2017). When Trump announced withdrawal in June 2017, supporters of climate change action expected further member withdrawal and as such, US withdrawal thus posed an existential challenge to the climate change regime. Contrary to NATO, UNFCCC institutional actors were more circumspect. Rather than pleading with Trump directly, they focused instead on preventing further withdrawals and strengthening coalitions with non-state actors, thereby employing a strategy of *behavioural* and *discursive resistance*. The UNFCCC had more limited *competences* and *leadership* capacity than NATO, but could build on strategies developed since the US non-ratification of the Kyoto protocol and the failed Copenhagen summit. It had worked toward widening its own mandate and establishing climate change action as norm through building up *external networks* and non-state actor orchestration (Hale and Roger 2014; Hickmann and Elsässer 2020).

It is important to pay attention to the previous experiences with the US as the UNFCCC had ‘seen this movie before’ (Interview #B7). In 2001, the Bush administration receded from the Kyoto Protocol, which still needed to be ratified by the US Senate (Pickering et al. 2018, 820). This experience affected the entire set up of global climate change governance. The Paris Agreement was, for instance, not conceived as a treaty to avoid the need for ratification (Kemp 2017, 87; Pickering et al. 2018). This also meant that withdrawal and importantly re-joining would be easier (Jotzo, Depledge, and Winkler 2018, 813; Pickering et al. 2018, 822). Furthermore, the UNFCCC increasingly developed an *external network* by engaging with non-state actors (e.g. Saerbeck et al. 2020), particularly after the breakdown of the COP15 in Copenhagen in 2009. The Paris Agreement incorporates, in this respect, non-state actors via the

possibility to join the 'Non-State Actor Zone for Climate Action' (NAZCA) (Pickering et al. 2018). This built-in trajectory provided a 'contingency plan in case the Paris agreement would fail' (Interview #B11).

Interviewees uniformly agreed that US withdrawal was 'inevitable' after the election (Interviews #B1, #B5, #B8, #B11, #B15–24). The UNFCCC thus had some time to reflect on the appropriate response and provided a diplomatic statement emphasising the rules of the process of exiting the Paris Agreement (Interviews #B5, #B6). This was a rather factual discursive approach. Public opposition to US withdrawal was taken instead by the other member states, US local governments and non-state actors, all of which launched various initiatives facilitated by the UNFCCC. This is a case of the orchestration of *behavioural* and *discursive resistance* through the mobilisation of like-minded actors.

It is indeed clear that the strength of UNFCCC officials lies with their *external networks* and the legitimacy of the climate change action norm. The Executive Secretary, Patricia Espinosa (2016–2022) has been a skilled operator but lacks, in terms of *leadership*, the political profile of NATO's Stoltenberg who had previously been Prime Minister and is also less outspoken than her predecessor Christiana Figueres (2010–2016) (King 2016). Indeed, there is a considerable contrast with Figueres, who *Time Magazine* called a 'force for nature' (Redford 2016). Espinosa, in contrast, was even refused a meeting with Secretary of State Tillerson in 2017 (Milman 2017). The UNFCCC secretariat itself consists of about 450 staff. Its *formal competences* have, however, traditionally been limited with its main tasks to organise the Conferences of the Parties and to act as an information hub (Article 9 of the Convention; see also Busch 2009; Depledge 2007). Officials also tried to remain impartial, avoided initiative and agenda-setting, and steered away from pro-active leadership to avoid stepping on the toes of the parties (Interview #B1, #B5). The UNFCCC, however, has considerably developed since Copenhagen and has adopted a much stronger entrepreneurial style prioritising communication, networking and positioning itself as a central informational actor (Saerbeck et al. 2020; Well et al. 2020).

The UNFCCC secretariat has thus tried to overcome its 'straitjacket' (Hickmann et al. 2021) by focusing on a role in the broader climate change regime, supporting more inclusive cooperation, replacing the legally binding Kyoto Protocol with a 'decentralised climate policy architecture', and including more non-state actors (Bäckstrand et al. 2017, 563). The UNFCCC has continuously enforced deeper engagement with non-state and sub-national actors by launching initiatives, such as the Momentum for Change Initiative, the Lima–Paris Action Agenda (LPAA), and NAZCA (Hickmann et al. 2021; Schroeder and Lovell 2012; Widerberg 2017; Aykut, Morena, and Foyer 2021). The UNFCCC initiates, moderates and negotiates this engagement and maintains it outside of the Conferences of the Parties by administering side-events by all kinds of actors (Hickmann and Elsässer 2020). The UNFCCC thus had a considerable support system in place by the time that Trump got elected. This network has been activated, and has largely activated itself, to oppose Trump's contestation and to re-legitimize the Paris Agreement. Support in favour of the Paris Agreement has come from various UNFCCC member states, but also US local governments, and many non-state actors.

For example, the other UNFCCC member states appeared as a cohesive front. Germany, Italy and France made a joint statement, saying 'the

momentum generated in Paris in December 2015 [is] irreversible and we firmly believe that the Paris Agreement cannot be renegotiated, since it is a vital instrument for our planet' (as cited in Walsh 2017). Chinese President Xi Jinping claimed to 'take a leadership role', which was significant given that China had become the biggest emitter of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions. In the US itself, several initiatives were launched, evidence of *behavioural* and *discursive resistance* by the network of like-minded actors (Aykut, Morena, and Foyer 2021). Several US corporations, including for example Apple, Google and Unilever issued full-page advertisements in leading newspapers in May 2007 (Betsill 2017, 190). In June 2017, mayors from the 'Mayors National Climate Action Agenda' signed an open letter (US Mayors 2017). The Global Climate Action Summit was initiated by the California governor Jerry Brown in September 2018, yet another instance of local support (Interview #B11).

To prevent the UNFCCC from long-term financial issues, the coalition of America's pledge offered not only to pay some of the contributions of the US budget (Interview #B1). This coalition also kept meeting the targets of the climate change agenda within the Paris Agreement (Hermwille 2018, 458). At the COP23 in November 2017 in Bonn, 1200 governors, mayors, business leaders, investors and college and university presidents created the movement 'We're still in' (Betsill 2017, 190; Interviews #B1, #B4, #B6). This movement collectively took opposition to the US government's decision, calling the US withdrawal 'out of step with what is happening in the United States' and declaring that they 'will continue to support climate action to meet the Paris Agreement' (Betsill 2017, 190). In other words, the US announcement to withdraw from the Paris Agreement caused considerable domestic contestation, which was a direct result of the UNFCCC previously developing external networks.

Compared to NATO, UNFCCC officials could not rely on *competences* or benefit from publicly strong *leadership*. Based on the previous experiences, however, the UNFCCC had become a more purposeful actor with an *organisational structure* that did not just facilitate conference management, but also strongly engaged in *external networking*. Indeed, where NATO could rely on traditional diplomatic networks, the UNFCCC built alliances with many non-state actors as well as following the experience with the Copenhagen summit. The more purposeful organisation and the newly built network conditioned the range of options available against the lack of competences and limited public leadership. The secretariat opted to remain resilient against US contestation. Rather it focused on the orchestration of behavioural and discursive resistance. This strategy worked. On his very first day in office, President Biden rejoined the Paris Agreement. While valuable time for climate action had been lost due to the Trump years, the relative ease with which the US could rejoin and the UNFCCC could continue implementing its mandate ultimately highlights that the UNFCCC did not fall apart due to the challenge posed by the Trump administration.

#### *WTO: Appellate Body*

For Trump, after decades of trade liberalisation, there was no demand for further multilateral cooperation on trade, and the WTO regime was viewed as

having essentially failed to deliver its expected goals (Bown and Keynes 2020). His main target became the WTO Appellate Body, a key feature of the Dispute Settlement Understanding (DSU), which had long been subject to criticism of judicial overreach. He claimed that the WTO benefits ‘everybody but us’ adding that ‘we lose the lawsuits, almost all of the lawsuits in the WTO’ and threatening that ‘if they don’t shape up, I would withdraw from the WTO’ (BBC News 2018). The Appellate Body normally consists of seven members. Under Trump, however, the US blocked the (re)appointment of members resulting in an Appellate Body that, by 2019, lacked the required number of three arbiters to function. This has effectively rendered the “crown jewel” of the WTO inoperable (Bown and Keynes 2020; Hopewell 2021a; Zaccaria 2022). The WTO continues to exist, but without a working arbitration mechanism it is no longer able to carry out all of its core functions. WTO actors did not respond to this challenge and no reforms were made. This final case shows a lack of *leadership*, a decentralised *organisational structure*, limited *competences* and no *external network*.

The WTO had strong *leadership* in the past. Renato Ruggiero (1995–1999) and Pascal Lamy (2005–2013) are generally acknowledged to have played a key role in world trade. At the time of Trump, the Director-General was Roberto Azevêdo (2013–2020), a career diplomat. While his background was not unsimilar to Espinosa at the UNFCCC, Azevêdo did little to address the assault on the Appellate Body and suddenly resigned during the COVID-19 crisis. His leadership style was hands-off, following the membership and refraining from activism (Interviews #C6, #C13, #C14, #C16). WTO officials also hold limited *competences*, with their influence mainly perceptible during trade negotiation rounds (Elsig 2011; Interviews #C1, #C11, #C16). The Secretariat’s staff are often described as operating ‘behind the scenes as active facilitators’ during negotiations (Bohne 2010; Buterbaugh and Fulton 2007; Yi-Chong and Weller 2008, 43; Interview #C17). However, their role in other operational domains of the organisation remains rather limited (Interview #C16). The institutional rules and norms of the organisations effectively constrain the Director-General and the WTO officials (Bohne 2010; Buterbaugh and Fulton 2007; Interviews #C16, #C17).

Particularly important for the WTO is its decentralised *structure* in which the Appellate Body and its own secretariat are quite insulated from the WTO Secretariat (Pauwelyn and Pelc 2019). It is, of course, natural for international courts to have autonomy from the political principals over which they need to adjudicate, and this is no different for the WTO Appellate Body (Abbott et al. 2015; Elsig 2011; Interviews #C5, #C6, #C8). The General Council has the authority to influence and control the Appellate Body’s internal operations (Interviews #C9, #C11), yet its consensus rule makes this difficult to achieve (Interviews #C4, #C5). The relative insulation of the Appellate Body made it also difficult for the Director-General to shield the Appellate Body, let alone put pressure on the Appellate Body to behaviourally adapt. The Appellate Body essentially followed its own reality in refusing to change course.

This is not to say that the Director-General does not hold informal influence within the WTO Secretariat. The Directors-General have tools at their disposal, such as meetings with a restricted group of membership’s representations in Geneva, and direct lines of communication with officials in member-state



capitals (Interview #C14). The Director-General's personality and leadership style however play a big role in how much influence they are willing to exert (Interviews #C14, #C17). Some Directors-General in the past have shown the influence their office can exert, having held a more assertive role during negotiations and even recently during the Appellate Body crisis by picking up the phone and calling presidents and prime ministers directly (Interview #C18). In response to US concerns, for instance, Pascal Lamy attempted to play a role in the Appellate Body secretariat's organisation by reshuffling staff and imposing restrictions on the number of assistants working at the Body (Interview #C12). This strategic move was intended to decrease the allocation of resources to pressure the Body to consider the concerns raised regarding the drafting process of case reports (Interview #C12).

His successor, Azevedo, adopted a neutral stance toward both the Appellate Body staff and the membership (Interviews #C12, #C17, #C18). He stayed on the sidelines, for instance, when in 2018, the Trump administration wanted to fire the director of the Appellate Body secretariat (Interviews #C9, #C12). As US contestation began to manifest itself, it became clear that the WTO leadership could not play any role in producing a cohesive and effective response strategy. Throughout the crisis, the WTO leadership consistently kept a conciliatory stance in public, and refrained from engaging directly (Interviews #C7, #C14). To provide an image of organisational unity, and in conscious avoidance of adopting an activist role, the WTO Secretariat and Director-General did not make references in their public statements to the Appellate Body or the issue of over-judicialisation of the organisation (Interview #C16).

The neutral stance came even though many staff within the WTO and across various divisions (including the Appellate Body) raised similar concerns regarding the Appellate Body and its Secretariat (Interviews #C1, #C9, #C16). As one interviewee noted, the only thing the WTO Secretariat 'can do is recommend, take minutes, and publish reports ... they cannot give direction to, or in any way influence, the internal workings of the division [Appellate Body]' (Interview #C7). In other words, the fragmented organisational structure within the WTO and the complicated relationship with the Appellate Body secretariat, the limited competences and the lack of direction by the leadership heavily constrained the WTO response.

The WTO Secretariat also did not have a developed *external network*, particularly not within the US. Throughout the Appellate Body crisis, the Trump administration enjoyed support from the US public with regard to world trade (Kim and Durkin 2020). Furthermore, trade officials in the US, both during the Trump administration and the preceding administration, have increasingly held negative views regarding the WTO (Interview #C1), which is essentially the opposite of the case of NATO or the more positive norm of climate action. More recently there has also been bipartisan alignment in the US Congress regarding the WTO, reflected by the fact that, as of May 2020, both the House of Representatives and the Senate had resolutions and proposals introduced at their sessions proposing the US withdrawal from the WTO (Levy and Brown 2020).

The WTO ranks low on the four variables. Despite some initial engagement by Lamy, *leadership* by Azevedo was lacking during the crisis of the Appellate

Body. The *organisational structure* of the WTO Secretariat is fragmented, and this inhibited a strategic response. The *formal competences* are weak and the WTO Secretariat did not have an *external network*, particularly not in the US. In the case of the Appellate Body, the range of available options was not just limited; the WTO Secretariat did not strategically respond, perhaps hoping for better days. Those better days did not come. In contrast to NATO and the UNFCCC which have moved on, the WTO Appellate Body is still not operational. The US under President Biden has not moved much to restore support for multilateral trade, also because of domestic support from either political party. The Appellate Body is, in this respect, an instance of lasting damage to international institutions from the Trump administration.

## **Conclusion**

Donald Trump's "America First" approach has put many IOs on the defensive. Trump and his administration posed an acute challenge, by the most powerful state in the system, questioning both the very need for international cooperation as well as the ability of IOs to effectively supply it. While scholars increasingly detail such populist assaults, little remains known about whether IOs can cope with and counter these existential challenges. This is surprising as we know that international institutions tend to be "sticky". Using case studies of NATO, the UNFCCC's Paris Agreement and the WTO's Appellate Body, this article has shown that institutional actors vary in their ability to formulate and implement appropriate survival strategies. In particular, it has shown that the institutional actors in these IOs differ in terms of their leadership, organisational structure, competences and external networks. This has affected their response options. Institutional actors need to proactively engage and some do not have such abilities.

NATO officials publicly leveraged the Trump challenge to increase burden-sharing among allies while quietly undermining Trump's position on Russia. UNFCCC officials considered US withdrawal as inevitable and focused on indirectly preventing further withdrawals. WTO officials did little to save the Appellate Body. Such variation in responses cannot be simply explained by the difference in policy area or the specific approach that Donald Trump took toward these institutions. Rather the cases highlight variation in the ability of IO actors to formulate survival strategies from the available range of alternatives. NATO scored strong on leadership, structure, competences and external networks. This allowed for a tailored response. UNFCCC staff relied on their support network that they had developed previously, as their options to directly engage Trump were limited. The WTO Secretariat was very constrained.

The comparative approach also highlights the relevance of the four variables used in this article. Strong and weak *leadership* was on display in NATO and the WTO. The fragmented *organisational structure* inhibited the WTO, whereas *formal competences* played a role for NATO. Previously established *external networks* were centrally important for the UNFCCC, as were the links between NATO and the US foreign policy establishment. NATO scored high on all four variables, the WTO low and for the UNFCCC we can observe a medium score across variables. In this respect, the four variables are also mutually reinforcing. The NATO Secretary-General was not just a former

prime minister but the formal chair of Council meetings, which put him two steps ahead of his counterparts in the UNFCCC and WTO. It is furthermore interesting that much of the action to counter such existential challenges took place outside the boundaries of the IOs themselves. For NATO, this was at least as much about bilateral meetings in the Oval Office, a speech to US Congress and an appearance on *Fox News* as it was about closed-door negotiations in Brussels between diplomats in IO committees.

The purpose of this article has not been to causally link responses by institutional actors with eventual outcomes for IOs. The ability of institutional actors to respond is one factor, and not the only one. It is important to consider, in this respect, the constraints and opportunities that institutional actors face. With Trump out of office, and President Joe Biden repairing some of the damage done to international institutions, it is tempting to once again raise the flag of the liberal international order. Even though the future of the WTO remains uncertain, the Paris Agreement was saved and NATO has come out unshattered. At the same time, with an increasingly dense global governance landscape and power transitions still underway, it remains likely that some of the larger IOs will face further contestations and existential challenges. The demand for cooperation will evolve as power transitions continue, and actors will likely further challenge IOs on the ability to supply and facilitate international cooperation. In this respect we also need further research on the mechanisms that help IOs craft appropriate responses beyond the existential challenges posed by Donald Trump. Furthermore, policy-makers are well-advised to continue to invest in IOs and particularly their leadership and bureaucracies to make them more robust to further challenges.

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No potential conflict of interest has been reported by the authors.

### **Appendix**

Supplemental data for this article in an Appendix can be accessed at <https://cris.maastrichtuniversity.nl/en/publications/donald-trump-and-the-survival-strategies-of-international-organisations>

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