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# *Institutional Power and Influence: The Action Logic of International Organizations in the Context of Great Power Competition*

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***Abstract.*** In the context of the increasingly multipolar global order, the role of international organizations in the competition among major powers is increasingly complex and critical. From the perspective of institutional power, this paper discusses the operational logic of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) under the background of Sino US strategic competition. Through literature analysis and case studies, this paper systematically combs the different understandings of rationalism and Constructivism on the behavior of international organizations, and compares and analyzes how two important international organizations maintain their authority and legitimacy under geopolitical tensions. The study found that although international organizations are subject to the interests of major powers, their institutional design and normative power can still affect the behavior of Member States to a certain extent. This paper argues that enhancing procedural transparency and institutional adaptability is the key to maintaining effective governance of international organizations in the future. This study will help deepen the understanding of how international organizations play a role in the volatile global political situation, and provide enlightenment for Multilateral Governance Reform.

***Keywords:*** international organizations, great power rivalry, institutional power, global governance, multilateralism

## 1. Introduction

In the context of the accelerated evolution of the global order in the 21st century, the role of international organizations is increasingly complex and challenging. Traditionally, international organizations have been regarded as a neutral platform to promote multilateral cooperation, coordinate international behavior and maintain the rule system. However, with the increasingly fierce strategic competition between China and the United States and other major countries, the neutrality and effectiveness of these organizations are facing unprecedented pressure. Whether the World Trade Organization (WTO) can mediate Global trade disputes and whether the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) can reach a political consensus on major security issues reflect that international organizations are undergoing a dual test of legitimacy and functionality in maintaining the global governance order. Although international organizations are endowed with

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procedural and legal authority in system design, whether their institutional power can still maintain its actual effectiveness under the pressure of great powers is becoming a theoretical and practical issue of increasing concern [1].

At present, the academic circle's understanding of the behavioral logic of international organizations mainly revolves around two theoretical paths: on the one hand, from the perspective of rationalism, international organizations are regarded as a tool for cooperation between States, mainly serving the expansion of the interests of major powers; On the other hand, constructivism and institutionalism emphasize the normative power and institutional autonomy of organizations, and believe that they can shape the behavior of members through the framework of professional knowledge and legitimacy. The interpretation of rationalism has deep roots in the classic works of international cooperation [2]. The views of constructivism and institutionalism that emphasize organizational autonomy, legitimacy and bureaucratic logic have been developed in the study of comparative international organizations [3]. However, under the pressure of real political forces, the applicability of the two theoretical explanations in specific cases is still different. Based on this, this paper focuses on a core issue: how can international organizations use their institutional power to maintain influence and institutional stability in the international pattern of intensified competition among major powers? Taking the World Trade Organization and the United Nations Security Council as typical cases, this paper uses the methods of literature analysis and comparative study to explore their performance in the aspects of institutional structure, coping strategies and political game, aiming to provide theoretical deepening and policy enlightenment for understanding the actual operation logic of international organizations in global governance, and provide ideas for the reform and adjustment of the multilateral order in the future.

## 2. Theoretical frameworks of institutional authority in international organizations

### 2.1. State-centric rationalist approaches

Rationalist paradigm has traditionally occupied a core position in the academic research of international relations, especially in the analysis of the formation and operation of international organizations (IOS). From this perspective, IOS is conceptualized as a mechanism created and maintained by sovereign states (especially leading powers) to manage cooperation in an essentially centralized global system [2]. The role of these institutions is to reduce transaction costs, improve transparency, and monitor compliance with agreements that would otherwise be difficult to implement unilaterally. Under this framework, the final decision-making power still belongs to the state, while IOS operates within the narrow scope of operation. Therefore, the behavior of IOS is largely regarded as the preference of influential member states, and its institutional framework is usually adjusted to safeguard the strategic interests of these key actors. Keehan's pioneering work believes that even without a single hegemony, IOS can promote sustained cooperation by alleviating the dilemma of collective action [2]. However, the rationalist model believes that the effectiveness of IOS depends on its consistency with national interests. When international action deviates from the priorities of major powers, its legitimacy and influence tend to be weakened. Drezner further elaborated on this dynamic through the concept of "institutional complexity": powerful countries will strategically choose the platform that best matches their policy objectives, and either use or avoid specific international actions according to specific circumstances [4]. Although this perspective provides a pragmatic and power-oriented explanation of institutional behavior, it often underestimates the potential of international action to accumulate independent initiative and exert influence outside the direct control of the state.

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### 2.2. Constructivist and institutionalist emphasis on organizational autonomy and normative influence

Different from the rationalist assumption that the state is the center, constructivism and social institutionalism hold that international organizations are not just tools of intergovernmental will. Instead, they emphasized that international organizations could operate as semiautonomous entities and were influenced by internal bureaucratic culture, expertise and normative frameworks. As Barnett and finimore said, international organizations exercise their power by operating as rational and legitimate bureaucracies. The objectivity of these institutions enables them to define appropriate behaviors and shape international expectations [3].

This normative authority operates through various mechanisms. International organizations play an important role in building global issues, classifying issues, legitimizing solutions, and influencing policy paradigms. For example, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the world bank have always guided the economic reform of developing countries by advocating structural adjustment plans and market-oriented policies; such institutional impacts have been analyzed in the relevant literature of international organizations [1]. Such interventions indicate that institutional actions may originate from internal logic and cognitive communities rather than direct national directives. In addition, international organizations promote the socialization of Member States by strengthening common norms and expectations, thus embedding certain practices into the structure of the international order.

Constructivist analysis also emphasizes the cases that international organizations resist the pressure of dominant states by invoking procedural integrity, technical expertise or moral principles. The concept of "path dependence" shows that once institutional practices and standards are established, they can also obtain the ability to resist mutation even under strong external pressure [5]. Therefore, when rules and legitimacy are threatened, international organizations may impose restrictions on powerful member states. However, this autonomy is limited; International organizations are still rooted in the broader political context, and power asymmetry continues to affect their scope and discretion [1].

In general, the theoretical tension between rationalism and constructivism provides valuable insights into the nature of institutional power. Rationalism emphasizes the primacy of national interests and material capabilities, while constructivism and institutionalism reveal how international organizations can exert independent influence through bureaucratic legitimacy, expert authority and normative entrepreneurship. Grasping these opposing but complementary perspectives is crucial to examining how international organizations respond to the complexity of the competition between big countries, because in the competition between big countries, institutional credibility and strategic interests need to be constantly negotiated.

## 3. The World Trade Organization amidst great power rivalry

### 3.1. Institutional pillar of the liberal trading system

The World Trade Organization (WTO), founded in 1995, is the successor of the general agreement on Tariffs and trade (GATT), which aims to formally establish the core principles of international trade. As a global institution with a formal dispute settlement mechanism, WTO has always been the core institutional pillar of the free trade system [6]. Its rule-based framework aims to prevent protectionist policies and unilateral trade practices by providing member states with a legal mechanism for dispute settlement. The duties of WTO mainly focus on three major functions:

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promoting multilateral trade negotiations; Regularly review national trade policies through the trade policy review mechanism (TPRM); And settling disputes through the dispute settlement body (DSB) and its appellate body [6]. The authority of WTO largely stems from its structured procedures and reputation for fairness, which makes smaller and weaker countries more confident in participating in dispute settlement.

### 3.2. Escalating US–China tensions and the weakening of multilateral trade rules

Despite this institutional design, the WTO is still facing increasing challenges as the geopolitical competition between China and the United States intensifies; academic circles have emphasized how to emphasize trade multilateralism in Sino-US strategic competition [7]. China's rise as a global trade leader is testing the flexibility of the existing WTO norms, especially in state led economic practices, such as industrial subsidies and intellectual property law enforcement. During the trump administration, tensions escalated significantly. At that time, the United States imposed extensive tariffs on Chinese imports outside the WTO dispute settlement process. A critical institutional moment occurred when the United States blocked the appointment of members of the appellate body, resulting in its failure to reach the quorum required for the issuance of the final decision, and effectively paralyzing the judicial function [6].

### 3.3. Adaptive strategies and the constraints of legal governance

In order to deal with these interferences, the WTO has adopted alternative strategies to maintain its relevance, including promoting the conclusion of plurilateral agreements among some members (for example, the joint declaration initiative on Digital Trade and investment facilitation) [5]. These measures enable like-minded countries to promote rule-making in emerging areas without reaching a complete consensus, which reflects that the WTO is turning to a more flexible cooperation mode when multilateral negotiations are deadlocked. However, these adjustments have not fully restored people's confidence in the WTO's ability to mediate disputes between major powers, because when powerful members leave or hinder key functions, the organization's reliance on consensus and voluntary compliance remains a structural weakness [6].

The current situation of WTO highlights the internal conflict between rule-based governance and power-driven diplomacy; Without comprehensive reform and new political commitment, the role of WTO in an era of strategic competition rather than cooperative institution building may be weakened [7].

## 4. The United Nations Security Council in the context of geopolitical competition

### 4.1. Institutional architecture and power asymmetry

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is the main body in the United Nations system to maintain international peace and security. Its institutional framework reflects the power distribution after World War II—the most significant is the privileged status of the veto power of the five permanent members (P5) [8]. This design ensures that any binding decision made under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations must be tacitly approved by these major powers. This mechanism not only brings major powers into the United Nations system, but also institutionalizes their strategic influence.

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### 4.2. Diplomatic stalemate and its impact on global crisis response

The consequences of this institutional setting are obvious in the inconsistency of the Security Council in dealing with contemporary crises: when one or more permanent members are directly involved in a conflict or aligned with the parties to the conflict, the collective action of the Security Council is often difficult to achieve. The Ukrainian war is a typical example. The use of the veto and political differences have hindered the Security Council from taking comprehensive measures [9]. This repeated stalemate has prompted some Member States to seek other ways, such as invoking the General Assembly resolution on "uniting for peace" or taking action through regional organizations, but these alternatives usually lack the executive power conferred by the Security Council under Chapter VII of the Charter [10].

### 4.3. Adaptive mechanisms to sustain institutional influence

Despite institutional constraints, the Security Council still uses procedural and auxiliary mechanisms to maintain its influence, including issuing non-binding presidential statements, relying on sanctions committees and expert monitoring groups, and deploying peacekeeping operations according to specific mandates [9]. The rotating presidency of the Security Council also provides an opportunity for non-permanent members to regularly set agendas that can focus on issues that have not been given sufficient attention or catalyze thematic debates. This adaptive approach enables the Security Council to maintain a certain degree of operational relevance even in the case of serious geopolitical differences.

In a word, although the Security Council is still constrained by the conflict of interests among its most powerful member states, it is still exercising its institutional power through procedural innovation and auxiliary participation. However, its long-term effectiveness is still a problem if major structural reforms are not carried out or cooperation commitments are renewed [10].

## 5. Comparative assessment and consequences for multilateral governance

### 5.1. Shared institutional responses to geopolitical strain

A comparative study of the WTO and the UN Security Council shows that they have common adaptive strategies: both emphasize procedural integrity to maintain legitimacy, and both have developed alternative measures when the main decision-making mechanism is blocked (the WTO adopts plurilateral agreements or joint security initiatives; the UN Security Council adopts presidential statements and subsidiary bodies) [5].

### 5.2. Divergent institutional logics: mandate, authority, and domain-specific challenges

Despite these similarities, the fundamental differences in tasks, powers and issues have shaped different patterns of behavior: the power of WTO is judicial and rule-based, aiming to solve trade disputes through legal means; The power of the UN Security Council is political and based on the veto power, relying on diplomatic negotiations and seeking consensus. These differences make each institution different in sensitivity to the politics of major powers [6].

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### 5.3. Policy implications and pathways for institutional renewal

The policy implications are as follows: revitalizing the WTO dispute settlement mechanism and updating rules to deal with state capitalism and digital trade are the priorities of Trade Governance; The gradual reform of the United Nations Security Council, such as the voluntary restriction of the veto power in case of atrocities and the improvement of transparency, is a feasible measure to improve the responsiveness without constitutional reform [7]. Rebuilding trust among Member States and coordinating normative principles with geopolitical realities are crucial to maintaining multilateralism.

## 6. Conclusion

This study examines the exercise of institutional authority by international organizations amid intensifying great power competition, focusing on the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Both institutions employ distinct but adaptive strategies to preserve their relevance and functionality. The WTO relies heavily on legal procedures and a rules-based framework to resolve trade disputes, deriving legitimacy from its structured and impartial processes. However, its operational effectiveness is increasingly constrained when major powers challenge or bypass its mechanisms, as exemplified by the paralysis of its Appellate Body.

In contrast, the UNSC functions in a highly political environment where decision-making is strongly influenced by the veto power held by its permanent members. This often results in deadlock, yet the Council continues to exert influence through procedural tools, such as presidential statements and by delegating tasks to subsidiary bodies, including sanctions committees and peacekeeping operations. These adaptive measures demonstrate the institution's capacity to maintain agency despite deep geopolitical divisions.

The findings reveal that international organizations are not merely passive arenas for state competition but possess strategic autonomy and institutional resilience. To enhance their credibility and effectiveness, reforms should focus on increasing transparency, procedural fairness, and inclusivity for underrepresented members. Such efforts are essential to sustaining multilateral cooperation amid growing international fragmentation. Future research should further investigate how institutional authority adapts to evolving power dynamics, technological developments, and new forms of economic and security competition, providing valuable insights for the reform and renewal of global governance systems.

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