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Rational, Norms, and Strategy: The Dual-Logical Analysis of the Instrumental Attributes of International Institutions

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Abstract. As strategic competition among major powers continues to intensify, international institutions are increasingly evolving from platforms for promoting cooperation into tools of strategic rivalry, a trend driven by factors such as the strategic interests of major powers, technological advancements, and interactions between states and private entities. Building on the analytical foundation of the triple mechanisms of "deprivation, decoupling, and counterbalancing" proposed in existing research, this paper integrates the dual perspectives of rational choice institutionalism and social institutionalism to construct a comprehensive theoretical framework for explaining the weaponization of international institutions. This paper argues that the weaponization of international institutions is both a rational strategic choice by dominant states based on cost-benefit calculations and a social process involving the politicized reconstruction of the international normative order. Through the empirical research on three typical cases: SWIFT financial sanctions(deprivation mechanism), technological exclusion under the "Clean Network" initiative(decoupling mechanism), and rule competition in infrastructure alliances (counterbalancing mechanism), this paper reveals the differentiated combination form, interaction mechanism and intrinsic tension of dual logic in different weaponization mechanisms. This paper finds that the evolution of institutional weaponization in nowadays shows an upward trend from "utilizing existing systems" to "creating new rules", from "single-point strike" to "system competition".

Keywords: Weaponization, Rational Choice Institutionalism, Sociological Institutionalism, Mechanisms, Dual-logic

1. Introduction

The concept of "weaponization of international institutions" refers to the intentional utilization or manipulation of international institutions by certain states or actors to advance their strategic interests [1]. Since the 21st century, the international system has undergone deep order adjustments. With the rise of emerging countries, the U.S.-led "liberal international order" faces unprecedented challenges. The forms and domains of major-power competition has transformed. In recent years, a series of notable international events has highlighted this trend. Following the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis in 2022, the United States, in coordination with the European Union, excluded multiple Russian banks from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication

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(SWIFT). Then, the United States launched the "Clean Network" initiative, rallying dozens of countries to exclude China's Huawei from 5G network construction. Additionally, the United States spearheaded the establishment of mechanisms such as the "Blue Dot Network", aimed at countering China's Belt and Road Initiative at the level of rules and standards. These phenomena collectively point to a core reality: international institutions are increasingly becoming tools of sanctions dominated by major powers. Existing research has preliminarily explored this phenomenon. Tian and An [2] systematically proposed three mechanisms for the weaponization of international institutions: deprivation, decoupling, and counterbalancing, and analyzed their selection logic. However, most existing studies focus on such strategic choices , failing to fully uncover the deeper theoretical logic behind the weaponization of international institutions. Specifically, two key points remain underexplored: 1. The process of the weaponization of international institutions in terms of rational choice and social identity; 2. The different mechanisms of the weaponization of international institutions with distinct logics. To address them, this paper introduces two core thoughts in international relations theory regarding institutional studies: rational choice institutionalism and social institutionalism. Through the perspective of dual theoretical approaches, this paper aims to further reveal the facts behind the weaponization of international institutions.

2. Literature framework

2.1. Rational Choice Institutionalism

Rational Choice Institutionalism originates from New Institutionalism in economics, with its core assumption being that actors (states) are rational maximizers. From this perspective, institutions facilitate cooperation by reducing the costs of making and enforcing agreements, providing information, and offering ways to resolve disputes [3]. When a dominant state decides whether and how to weaponize an international institution, it engages in a meticulous cost-benefit calculation. This calculation includes direct costs, indirect costs, and trade-offs between anticipated benefits. The weaponization decision represents the choice with the highest net benefit among various alternatives in overall consideration. The power structure embedded within international institutions is not neutral either. Dominant states strategically select institutions with centralized decision-making mechanisms, ambiguous rule interpretations, and weak enforcement and oversight to weaponize, aiming to maximize their own freedom of action and influence. Once a particular mode of weaponization proves effective, it can generate a path-dependent effect. Dominant states tend to repeatedly employ similar strategies, while sanctioned states accelerate the development of alternative institutions, leading to a "lock-in" effect of institutional competition that further exacerbates the fragmentation of the international system.

2.2. Sociological Institutionalism

Sociological institutionalism is deeply influenced by sociological organizational theory. Its core lies in the recognition that institutions are not merely collections of rules constraining behavior, but deep-seated structures that shape actors' social identities, cognitive frameworks, and standards of "appropriateness" [4]. Examining the weaponization of institutions from this perspective reveals its deeper socio-political implications. Successful institutional weaponization requires the dominant state to construct, through a well-designed discursive system, the target state as a "destroyer of international norms" while portraying its own actions as a legitimate defense of the "rules-based international order" [5]. Furthermore, the effectiveness of international institutions stems not only

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from their functionality but also from their legitimacy, which is based on widespread acceptance and voluntary compliance. Faced with the pressure of institutional weaponization, the sanctioned state will not merely seek functional alternatives but are more likely to launch a "normative counterattack." Undoubtedly, recurring instances of institutional weaponization will alter the fundamental perception of the "nature of international institutions" among members of the international community. Actors will learn from these experiences, adjusting their expectations of international cooperation, their trust in institutional commitments, and their own strategic dependency structures. This collective process of social learning constitutes an important micro-foundation driving the slow evolution of the international order.

2.3. An integrative analytical framework

The comprehensive application of Rational Choice Institutionalism and Sociological Institutionalism to analyzing the weaponization of international institutions makes it possible to construct a holistic analytical framework spanning micro-level strategies to macro-level structures and instrumental rationality to meaning construction. The core of this framework lies in understanding how actors engage in dual games within both the "instrumental field" and the "normative field" of international institutions. In the instrumental field, Rational Choice Institutionalism reveals the strategic essence of weaponization: states, as rational actors, treat international institutions as manipulable strategic assets. Through cost-benefit calculations, they selectively leverage, circumvent, or reshape institutional rules to suppress adversaries and secure relative advantages. Specific tactics include exploiting institutional dependencies to impose sanctions, creating alternative institutions for balancing, or maximizing self-interest through "selective compliance" and "agenda obstruction." However, the effectiveness of these rational strategies is deeply embedded within the normative field emphasized by Sociological Institutionalism. In the normative field, institutions are not merely sets of rules but also social structures composed of shared meanings, legitimacy, and identity. To achieve their weaponization objectives, actors must engage in discursive struggles and normative deconstruction. This dual process interacts and reinforces itself. The success of rational strategies often depends on the skillful manipulation of normative discourse, while the erosion of normative authority further incentivizes actors to adopt more radical and short-sighted instrumental practices. Ultimately, this dual logic drives the transformation of international institutions from platforms of cooperation into arenas of confrontation, leading to institutional fragmentation, the depletion of trust, and disorder in global governance.

3. Case analysis

3.1. The deprivation mechanism: SWIFT sanctions as a case study

SWIFT provides a platform for facilitating fund transfers among its member monetary institutions [6]. The 2022 exclusion of Russian banks offers a clear case for analyzing the dual logic of institutional weaponization, revealing not only the instrumental calculus but also the profound normative repercussions and strategic dilemmas faced by the weaponizing states.

3.1.1. Rational choice in action

SWIFT sanctions represent a classic practice of Rational Choice Institutionalism. The United States and Europe have strategically leveraged this global financial public good as a strategic asset, engaging in precise calculation and manipulation. The core of their strategy lies in exploiting

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network dependency and lock-in effects. By excluding major Russian banks from the system, they inflict targeted economic harm at a relatively low direct cost while maximizing the leverage of their financial power. The decision was underpinned by a cost-benefit analysis that weighed the immediate economic disruption to Russia against potential systemic risks and long-term costs to the dollar-based financial order.

3.1.2. Identity reconstruction and legitimacy contestation

In the normative domain, this action triggered a profound struggle over meaning and legitimacy. The sanctioning parties framed their actions as a necessary defense of the "rules-based international order" against Russian aggression, attempting to cloak instrumental deprivation in a veil of legitimacy [7]. However, this move fundamentally challenged the core normative principle that "global financial infrastructure should remain politically neutral and universally accessible." It demonstrated that even critical economic institutions can be weaponized, eroding the shared perception of SWIFT as a neutral technical platform. This normative erosion has accelerated a global reassessment of financial dependency, fueling narratives of "de-dollarization" and the pursuit of strategic autonomy in financial messaging.

3.1.3. Risks and dilemmas for the United States

The weaponization of SWIFT, while delivering short-term strategic gains, exposes the U.S. to significant long-term risks and dilemmas that exemplify the tension between instrumental exploitation and normative sustainability. Neutrality is a key source of SWIFT's global legitimacy and functional efficiency. However, the weaponized use of SWIFT has severely undermined its perceived neutrality. This loss of trust incentivizes other states, including allies and neutral parties. For the long run, the sanctions serve as a stark lesson on the vulnerabilities of dependency on Western-controlled financial infrastructure. This has galvanized global efforts to develop parallel payment systems and diversify reserve currencies (e.g., Russia's SPFS, China's CIPS); over time, the centrality of the U.S. dollar system and its seigniorage benefits will gradually erode.

Moreover, the normative narrative justifying the sanctions ("upholding rules") is contested by targets and observers who frame it as "politicization of economic tools." This contestation has weakened the moral authority of the U.S.-led order. As legitimacy erodes, ensuring compliance becomes increasingly costly, potentially pushing the U.S. toward more coercive and less legitimate measures and creating a self-defeating spiral. Finally, the success of SWIFT sanctions creates a path-dependent temptation to reuse similar financial weaponization tactics. However, overuse could accelerate the very fragmentation it seeks to prevent, ultimately constraining U.S. policy options and reducing its ability to wield financial power effectively in future crises.

3.2. The decoupling mechanism: "Clean Network" and digital technology

The "Clean Network" initiative establishes a set of standards centered on "data security" in the digital domain, excluding enterprises that fail to meet its political and security requirements from critical networks, applications, app stores, and cloud infrastructure.

3.2.1. Instrumental analysis

By reshaping the rules of the global digital industry chain, the United States seeks to maintain its technological dominance and security advantages in key fields such as 5G. Through this restrictive

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policy, the U.S. aims to isolate competitors such as Huawei from mainstream markets, securing time and space in the technological race by aligning with its allies [8]. This represents a rational strategy of decoupling to preserve competitive edge.

3.2.2. Discursive framing and normative contestation

At the level of normative construction, the U.S. frames technological issues in terms of security and ideology, creating and promoting a binary discourse of "clean" versus "dirty" networks. This is not merely a competition over technical standards but a normative campaign to shape values and identities in digital governance. The initiative relies heavily on a shared normative narrative of "democratic cybersecurity" among the U.S. and its allies. However, from a sociological institutionalist perspective, these "clean" standards, rooted in specific security anxieties and political alignment, have failed to gain broad global legitimacy due to their evident discriminatory nature. Instead, they have sparked a counter-narrative of "digital sovereignty," leading many countries to emphasize local data storage and regulatory autonomy. This contestation has fragmented normative authority in global digital governance and accelerated the pluralization of digital norms and institutions.

3.3. The counterbalancing mechanism: infrastructure alliances and contest over development narratives

Initiatives like the U.S.-led Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) aim to establish alternative institutional frameworks, provide differentiated development financing and infrastructure standards, and forge deep partnerships with developing countries, thereby competing for geopolitical and economic influence [9].

3.3.1. Instrumental domain

This represents a classic form of "rules-based balancing," shifting competition from sheer funding scale toward a contest over rules and standards. By promoting standards related to sustainability, transparency, and governance, these alliances erect entry barriers, shape recipient preferences, and seek to secure the moral and regulatory high ground in long-term rivalry with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

3.3.2. The battle for developmental legitimacy

At the heart of this competition lies the power to define "development norms." Both sides engage in vigorous discursive efforts to legitimize their respective models. The BRI emphasizes narratives like "connectivity" and "a community with a shared future," while initiatives like the PGII champion "high standards," "good governance," and "climate-resilient" growth. This competition gives rise to pluralism in development pathways, providing developing countries with more choices and greater bargaining power. However, it also leads to the fragmentation of normative authority in global development. Developing countries navigate among competing narratives, often leveraging this rules-based competition to their advantage. This dynamic illustrates how development discourse becomes a battleground for influence, where certain narratives may dominate, potentially sidelining alternative perspectives that could promote more equitable or context-sensitive standards [10]. The instrumental launch of initiatives such as the PGII is a direct response to the normative narrative of the BRI, seeking to offset BRI's efficiency and scale advantages with a normatively compelling

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discourse. Yet, if this "rules race" devolves into mere bloc confrontation, it risks politicizing global infrastructure public goods and undermining their efficient provision.

3.4. Comprehensive discussion

Based on empirical analysis of three typical cases, it becomes clear how the weaponization of international institutions, through the interaction of instrumental and normative domains, drives profound alienation in the global governance system. Most successful weaponization strategies rely heavily on discursive packaging and legitimacy construction within the normative domain. However, the execution of these strategies continuously erodes the original neutrality, universality, and cooperative consensus of international institutions. The instrumentalization of core norms in finance, digital governance, and infrastructure undermines the international community's fundamental trust in international institutions as "cooperation platforms". Meanwhile, actors' rational calculations in the instrumental domain compel them to constantly test and push the boundaries of norms. Once normative constraints are loosened due to weaponization, more radical and short-sighted instrumental exploitation is unleashed. The loss of SWIFT's neutrality has incentivized financial decoupling, while the exclusionary logic of the "Clean Network" has spurred waves of digital sovereignty. The ultimate outcome of this dual-level interplay is the comprehensive alienation of international institutions. Institutions evolve from platforms for addressing collective problems into arenas for competing over power and interests. This directly leads to institutional fragmentation, bloc-based cooperation, and a crisis in governance efficacy. Ultimately, the dual logic of weaponizing international institutions is driving global governance through a profound paradigm shift—from a problem-solving model based on neutral rules and cooperation to an order-competition model centered on power rivalry and normative contestation.

4. Conclusion

This study seeks to integrate the dual logics of Rational Choice Institutionalism and Social Institutionalism to reveal the complex mechanisms behind the weaponization of international institutions. Through an analysis of three typical cases, this study demonstrates that the weaponization of international institutions is neither purely a matter of strategic calculation nor merely a process of normative reconstruction, but rather the result of the synergistic interaction of these two logics. At its core, the weaponization of international institutions is a rational strategic choice made by dominant states to maximize their strategic interests through institutional leverage, dependency exploitation, and rule-shaping. At the same time, it is also a profound process of socialization and politicization, involving the deliberate framing of institutional purposes and identities, normative competition, and the reconstruction of meaning. The cases indicate that successful weaponization often relies on anchoring instrumental actions within legitimizing normative narratives. However, the inherent tensions in this dual-logic interaction generate self-undermining effects. Although instrumental exploitation may yield short-term strategic gains, it systematically erodes the normative foundations—neutrality, trust, and shared meaning—upon which institutional authority and cooperative governance depend. The resulting institutional fragmentation, bloc-based alignments, and normative pluralism signal a profound transformation in the role of international institutions. Thus, the evolution of institutional weaponization exhibits a shift from leveraging existing systems to actively creating alternative rules, and from targeted actions to systemic competition. This paradigm shift poses severe challenges to global governance, exacerbating coordination failures, deepening geopolitical divisions, and weakening the provision of

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global public goods. Future research could further explore how middle powers and non-state actors respond to and resist the weaponization of international institutions, as well as the conditions under which institutional resilience or reconstruction can emerge. In conclusion, understanding the weaponization of international institutions requires moving beyond purely rationalist or constructivist approaches toward an integrated perspective that captures how power, norms, and strategy collectively reshape the very structure of international order.

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