

The Credibility-Governance Dilemma: How Geopolitical Rivalry Undermines the Technical Authority of International Organisations

Vérène Niyomana

University of Burundi, Bujumbura, Burundi

This article develops and tests the concept of the “credibility-governance dilemma” to explain how geopolitical rivalry systematically undermines the authority of international organisations (IOs). Moving beyond traditional narratives of institutional decline, it introduces a specific causal mechanism—the politicisation-credibility feedback loop—by which states weaponise IOs’ technical procedures, compelling them to choose between preserving procedural integrity and responding to political demands. Either option erodes the IO’s epistemic authority, leading to institutional bypass and fragmentation. Through structured, focused comparisons and qualitative process-tracing of two key cases—the paralysis of the WTO (World Trade Organization)’s Appellate Body (AB) (2017-2022) and the politicisation of the WHO (World Health Organization)’s COVID-19 origin investigation (2020-2021)—this article demonstrates how great power contestation (mainly US-China) turns technical domains into arenas of geopolitical conflict. Findings show that strategic procedural contestation initiates a self-reinforcing cycle: Reduced credibility encourages member states to pursue “politically safer” minilateral alternatives, further diminishing the relevance and resources of the universal IO. The article concludes that the durability of technical IOs in the 21st century depends more on their perceived impartiality than on their legal frameworks, and that the credibility-governance dilemma offers a general mechanism for institutional decline in an age of renewed great-power competition.

Keywords: international organisations, credibility, geopolitical rivalry, WTO, WHO, mini-lateralism

Introduction

The post-Cold War liberal international order, which was once characterised by the consistent expansion of universal, rules-based multilateralism, faces what many scholars describe as an existential crisis (Ikenberry, 2018). This crisis extends beyond mere fluctuations in commitment by major powers and signifies a more profound disruption of the very foundations of international authority. At the core of this dilemma is a paradox: The international organisations (IOs), created to manage interdependence through technical expertise and neutral procedures, are increasingly under siege from the geopolitical rivalries they were meant to transcend. This article argues that the main battleground in this crisis is not over material resources or voting majorities, but over credibility—the perceived legitimacy stemming from an IO’s epistemic authority and procedural neutrality.

Vérène Niyomana, Ph.D., Faculty of Law and Political Science, Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Burundi, Bujumbura, Burundi.

The World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) exemplify this tension. Both are quintessential “technical” IOs whose power historically stemmed from their claim to objective expertise—the WTO through its quasi-judicial dispute settlement system and the WHO through its scientific leadership in global health (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Fidler, 2021). Yet, in recent years, both have been plunged into high-profile crises directly tied to US-China rivalry. The WTO’s Appellate Body (AB), the crown jewel of its rules-based system, was rendered inoperative in December 2019 after the United States systematically blocked the appointment of new judges. Simultaneously, the WHO’s scientific investigation into the origins of COVID-19 became a geopolitical football, with the United States and others accusing the agency of capitulating to Chinese political interference (Kugler, 2022). These episodes are typically analysed as symptoms of broader “multilateralism in crisis”. However, this article contends they are manifestations of a specific, under-theorised causal process that systematically erodes IO authority.

This article introduces and empirically examines the concept of the credibility-governance dilemma. The main argument is that when great power rivalry infiltrates the technical spheres of an IO, it initiates a politicisation-credibility feedback loop with harmful effects. States involved in strategic competition engage in strategic procedural contestation—exploiting or manipulating an IO’s rules and processes to gain geopolitical advantage or hinder adversaries. This forces the IO and its secretariat into a difficult choice: either (a) accept politicization, bending technical procedures to meet geopolitical demands and thus compromising its epistemic neutrality and credibility with part of its membership; or (b) maintain its technical integrity, risking overt retaliation (e.g., withdrawal of funding, exit threats, paralysing blockades) from the aggrieved great power, leading to institutional deadlock. Significantly, both options drain the organisation’s credibility capital—the trust and perceived legitimacy that underpin its authority.

This reduced credibility leads to a direct behavioural consequence: It causes member states, including middle powers and even the contesting parties themselves, to pursue alternative institutional arrangements. Politically safer, more adaptable mini-lateral coalitions provide a practical alternative without the perceived negative baggage of a politicised, paralysed, or compromised universal body (Kahler, 2018). This institutional bypass, in turn, further deprives the original IO of political attention, resources, and relevant business, intensifying its crisis in a self-reinforcing feedback cycle. Therefore, the dilemma not only causes institutional paralysis but also promotes active fragmentation—the shift from universalism to a fragmented “spaghetti bowl” of competing and overlapping governance arrangements (Alter & Meunier, 2009).

The article makes three principal contributions. First, it theorises a specific causal mechanism linking geopolitical rivalry to institutional decay, moving beyond correlational or descriptive accounts. Second, it integrates theories of epistemic authority with the literature on institutional contestation, offering a micro-foundational account of how politics influences technical governance. Third, it provides a rigorous empirical test through a structured, focused comparison of two key cases using qualitative process-tracing methodology. By tracing the sequence of events, actor motivations, and discursive shifts in the WTO and WHO cases, the analysis illustrates the operation of the credibility-governance dilemma in practice.

Theoretical Framework: The Credibility-Governance Dilemma and the Politicisation-Credibility Feedback Loop

The authority of international organisations has long been a key issue in international relations. Traditional rationalist institutionalism viewed IOs as tools to lower transaction costs and resolve cooperation problems

among states (Keohane, 1984). Conversely, constructivist and sociological institutionalists highlighted IOs' independent power derived from their bureaucratic culture, expertise, and capacity to shape social realities (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). This article draws on the latter perspective, explicitly examining epistemic authority—the influence that comes from being recognised as a legitimate source of knowledge and a neutral arbiter, grounded in expertise.

Technical IOs such as the WTO and WHO derive their influence not through coercive power but via credibility. This credibility is a composite asset built on three pillars:

1. Procedural neutrality: The belief that rules and processes are applied fairly, without favouring any specific state or bloc. This underpins the idea of a “level playing field” (Dellmuth et al., 2019).

2. Expertise-based authority: The acknowledgement that the IO's staff, panels, and recommendations are guided by specialised, apolitical knowledge—whether it is legal jurisprudence, economic evidence, or scientific consensus.

3. Output legitimacy: The belief that the IO's work yields effective, welfare-enhancing outcomes for its members (Scharpf, 1999).

When these pillars are strong, IOs acquire what can be called “credibility capital”. States follow rulings or guidelines not only because of coercion or self-interest, but also because they perceive the process as legitimate (Hurd, 2007). The WTO's dispute settlement system, before its crisis, was praised as the “jewel in the crown” because members considered its panels and the Appellate Body to be impartial arbiters (Petersmann, 2018). Similarly, the WHO's authority during health crises relies on member states and the public trusting its scientific assessments to be free of political influence.

The credibility-governance dilemma within international organisations (IOs) is not simply caused by disagreement or non-compliance. Instead, it is provoked by a specific and complex form of state behaviour: strategic procedural contestation (SPC). SPC occurs when a state, mainly motivated by broader geopolitical rivalry, intentionally exploits or manipulates the formal and informal procedures of an IO. The goal is to gain a procedural advantage over a rival or to undermine the IO's institutional limits on the state's own autonomy (Morse & Keohane, 2014). This surpasses mere criticism or rule-breaking; it is a focused effort to use the IO's rules, processes, and norms as tools in a geopolitical conflict.

This contestation manifests through calculated actions that weaponise procedure. For instance, a state may abuse consensus or appointment rules to paralyse a key decision-making body, rendering it inoperative. Alternatively, it might demand formal investigations or procedural reviews with explicitly politicised mandates designed to embarrass a rival or discredit the institution itself. Another tactic involves flooding the IO's technical or dispute-resolution systems with a high volume of frivolous, politically motivated complaints, thereby overwhelming its administrative capacity and draining its resources. Furthermore, states engaged in SPC often engage in strategic public framing, deliberately characterising apolitical, technical decisions made by the IO's staff as evidence of deep-seated institutional bias toward a geopolitical adversary. This seeks to erode the organisation's legitimacy in the public eye.

When a great power engages in this form of contestation in a domain central to the IO's core technical mandate, it creates a critical juncture for the institution (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). The IO's leadership and secretariat are forced into an impossible choice. If they rigorously enforce procedural rules against the great power, they risk provoking overt confrontation, defection, or the outright collapse of cooperation. Conversely, if they accommodate the procedural manipulation to preserve governance functionality, they sacrifice the neutrality

and credibility of their own processes. This acute trade-off between protecting the institution's operational function and upholding its impartial credibility is the essence of the dilemma at hand, with profound implications for the IO's long-term authority and effectiveness.

Path A: Acquiescence to politicisation. The IO bends its technical processes to accommodate geopolitical demands. For example, a secretariat might water down a scientific report, or a dispute settlement body might issue an interpretive ruling that clearly aligns with one side's political stance. The immediate effect may be the appeasement of the contesting state and the avoidance of overt institutional breakdown. However, the long-term cost is high: The IO is viewed by other members of its epistemic community and the public as having compromised its neutrality. Its expert authority is undermined. As Haas (1992) noted, the power of epistemic communities depends on their commitment to truth-seeking norms; violating these norms for political expediency destroys their authority.

Path B: Upholding technical integrity. The IO and its organs resist political pressure and steadfastly enforce their technical rules and standards. The immediate consequence is that the opposing great power, whose demands remain unmet, escalates its retaliation. This can include funding freezes, withdrawal from key agreements, public vilification of the IO, or the outright blocking of its processes (as with the WTO AB). The result is institutional paralysis—the IO is unable to operate effectively within its core domain. Although it may retain the moral high ground of integrity, it becomes practically powerless. Its credibility is damaged not by corruption but by incapacity; it is exposed as unable to perform its essential functions amid strong opposition.

The Politicisation-Credibility Feedback Loop

Crucially, both Path A and Path B result in the same outcome: a significant reduction in the IO's credibility capital (see Table 1). This reduction triggers a feedback loop between politicisation and credibility.

1. Depleted credibility: The IO is now seen as either politically compromised (Path A) or impotent (Path B).
2. Loss of centrality: Member states, facing uncertainty and distrust, begin to bypass the IO. They seek alternative venues such as mini-lateral coalitions, regional agreements, or ad hoc partnerships to achieve their governance goals. These alternatives are attractive precisely because they are perceived as more controllable, flexible, and insulated from the geopolitical toxicity that has infected the universal body (Vabulas & Snidal, 2021).
3. Institutional fragmentation: The proliferation of alternative forums fragments global governance. The original IO loses its monopoly (or primacy) in its issue area.
4. Reinforced politicisation: Fragmentation and bypass further weaken the IO. Its budget may shrink, its top staff may leave, and its relevance may decline. This makes it even more susceptible to additional rounds of SPC, as its remaining authority becomes easier to challenge. The cycle is closed, creating a downward spiral.

This framework proposes several testable hypotheses for our case studies:

- H1: A period of intensifying geopolitical rivalry between major powers will precede observable strategic procedural contestation within a technical IO.
- H2: The IO will face explicit pressure to alter its technical procedures/outputs for geopolitical reasons, creating a visible dilemma for its leadership.
- H3: Regardless of the path chosen (acquiescence or integrity), the IO will experience a measurable decline in its perceived credibility among a range of stakeholders (other member states, epistemic community, media).
- H4: Following the credibility decline, member states will initiate or accelerate efforts to create or utilise alternative mini-lateral governance mechanisms that bypass the contested IO.

Table 1

The Politicisation-Credibility Feedback Loop: A Sequential Model

Stage	Process	Key actors & actions	Immediate outcome	Cumulative effect
1. Trigger & contestation	Geopolitical rivalry is injected into a technical IO domain.	Great power(s): Engage in Strategic Procedural Contestation (SPC)—weaponising the IO’s own rules (e.g., blocking appointments, demanding politicised investigations).	The IO’s technical process becomes a theatre for geopolitical conflict.	The IO’s core function is politicised, creating an institutional crisis point.
2. The credibility-governance dilemma	The IO faces an impossible choice regarding its procedural integrity.	IO leadership/secretariat: Must choose between: • Path A (acquiescence): Bend technical procedures to accommodate geopolitical demands.	Path A: Short-term conflict avoidance, but perceived compromise.	The IO’s credibility capital—built on perceived neutrality and expertise—is depleted, regardless of the path chosen.
3. Credibility depletion & behavioural response	Member states lose trust in the IO’s utility and impartiality.	Member states (including middle powers): Observe the loss of credibility. They seek reliable, functional alternatives to achieve governance goals.	Decline in deference to the IO’s rulings/guidelines. Increased rhetorical attacks.	Functional demand emerges for governance venues insulated from the contested IO’s pathologies.
4. Institutional bypass & fragmentation	States exit or circumvent the contested IO, creating new institutional arrangements.	Coalitions of states: Form or empower minilateral fora, plurilateral agreements, or ad-hoc alliances (e.g., MPIA, GHSA).	Proliferation of alternative, overlapping governance mechanisms.	The universal IO’s centrality and monopoly on its issue area are eroded. Global governance fragments.
5. Feedback & reinforced vulnerability	Fragmentation weakens the original IO, making it more susceptible to future contestation.	Weakened IO: Loses resources, relevance, and political support. Great power(s): Perceive the IO as a less consequential arena, lowering the cost of further SPC.	The IO’s capacity and legitimacy are further diminished.	The cycle is reinforced. The IO enters a downward spiral, becoming increasingly vulnerable to the very geopolitical pressures that triggered its initial crisis.

The following sections test this theoretical model against the empirical record of the WTO and WHO crises.

Methodology

To evaluate the credibility-governance dilemma model, this article employs a structured, focused comparison of two key cases, using qualitative process-tracing as the primary methodological tool (George & Bennett, 2005; Collier, 2011). This method is especially suitable for uncovering causal mechanisms in complex political processes, where the sequence, context, and perceptions of actors are essential.

Case Selection: The WTO and WHO.

The paralysis of the WTO’s Appellate Body (2017-2022) and the politicisation of the WHO’s COVID-19 origin investigation (2020-2021) are selected as “most likely” cases for observing the credibility-governance dilemma (Gerring, 2007). Both represent:

1. Core technical functions under attack: Each case involves a cornerstone of the organisation’s technical authority—legal adjudication for the WTO, scientific investigation for the WHO.
2. Clear geopolitical trigger: Both crises are inextricably linked to the escalating strategic rivalry between the United States and China.
3. Observable procedural contestation: In both instances, there is clear evidence of states using procedural tools (appointment blocks, demands for investigations) for geopolitical ends.

4. High salience and visibility: The crises played out in full public view, generating extensive documentation and discourse, which facilitates process-tracing.

While similar in these key aspects, the cases differ in the institutional domain (trade law vs. public health science) and the initial response of the IO (the WTO system essentially chose Path B/uphold integrity, leading to paralysis; the WHO leadership leaned toward Path A/acquiescence, resulting in accusations of compromise). This allows us to examine whether the theorised dilemma and its consequences hold across different contexts and strategic choices.

For each case, the analysis will identify evidence related to the four phases of the hypothesised causal mechanism (outlined in Section 2.1 and Table 1). The process-tracing aims to establish a detailed, sequential narrative linking the initial conditions to the outcomes through the intervening steps of the dilemma (Beach & Pedersen, 2019).

To ensure rigorous analysis and mitigate potential bias, this study adopts a triangulated approach that draws on multiple data sources. Primary documentary evidence will be drawn from key institutional records. From the WTO, this includes official Dispute Settlement Body (DSB) documents, General Council minutes, statements by major members like the US, China, and the EU, Appellate Body reports, and Secretariat communications. From the WHO, sources include World Health Assembly (WHA) resolutions, reports from the global study on origins, mission terms of reference, statements by the Director-General, and official member-state communications. To track the public narrative, a systematic media and discourse analysis will examine reporting and opinion in high-quality international outlets and specialised publications. Finally, secondary scholarly and expert analysis—including legal opinions, scientific commentaries, and policy papers from think tanks and academic journals—will be integrated to serve as a proxy for the epistemic community’s assessment of the credibility of both organisations.

Case Analysis

The WTO Appellate Body and the Paralysis of Judicial Neutrality

Phase 1: The geopolitical trigger—US-China rivalry and the “Unfair” trading system:

The credibility crisis of the WTO’s Dispute Settlement System (DSS) cannot be understood outside the context of the escalating US-China trade war initiated by the Trump administration in 2017-2018. The US grievance was twofold: first, that China’s state-capitalist model violated core WTO principles; second, that the WTO itself, particularly its Appellate Body, was ill-equipped to handle this challenge and had consistently overreached, eroding US sovereignty (Bown, 2021). The US framed China not just as a violator, but as a beneficiary of a broken system. This transformed the DSS from a technical arbiter of trade law into a central theatre in a broader geopolitical struggle over economic governance (Hopewell, 2021).

Phase 2: Strategic procedural contestation—The “Blockade” of the Appellate Body:

The US engaged in a textbook case of Strategic Procedural Contestation (SPC). Instead of simply ignoring unfavourable rulings, it weaponised the Appellate Body (AB)’s appointment process. Since 2017, the US unilaterally blocked the consensus needed to appoint new AB members, citing longstanding, detailed criticisms of AB “judicial overreach”—e.g., treating its reports as precedent, issuing advisory opinions, and exceeding 90-day deadlines (Hillman, 2020). While these were technical legal critiques, their deployment was explicitly geopolitical. US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer argued the AB had failed to hold China accountable and constrained the US’s ability to respond with unilateral tariffs (Lighthizer, 2020). The SPC was procedural

(blocking appointments), sustained, and aimed at disabling the system's core function to force a geopolitical and institutional recalibration.

Phase 3: The WTO's dilemma and credibility erosion—Choosing Path B (uphold integrity):

The WTO faced its dilemma. The AB and the Secretariat could have theoretically acquiesced (Path A) by issuing rulings that deliberately catered to US concerns about China or by pressuring AB members to resign. They did not. The AB continued to rule on cases, including those involving the US, applying its established legal interpretations. The final three AB members, whose terms had expired, continued to issue rulings until the body became inquorate in December 2019 (Mavroidis & Sapir, 2021).

The outcome was paralysis and erosion of credibility (Path B outcome). The AB chose integrity, and the US response was escalated retaliation: maintaining the blockade until the body ceased to function. This had a catastrophic effect on WTO credibility, but of a specific kind. The AB was not seen as biased but as impotent. Its credibility as a neutral arbiter was undermined because it could no longer serve that role. As a former AB member stated, "The system's greatest asset—its perceived legitimacy and neutrality—is being destroyed not because it is wrong, but because it is being rendered inoperative" (Van den Bossche, 2018). Media discourse shifted from "the WTO court" to "the paralysed WTO court" (Financial Times, 2019). The epistemic community of trade lawyers overwhelmingly decried the destruction of a pillar of the rules-based system, viewing it as a profound loss of credible governance (Pauwelyn, 2019b).

Phase 4: Feedback loop and institutional bypass—The rise of the Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement (MPIA) and plurilateralism:

The severe loss of credibility in the Dispute Settlement System (DSS) prompted an immediate and strategic behavioural shift among WTO members, confirming the expected mechanism of institutional bypass. As the system's highest appellate function became inoperative, countries—especially those with active trade interests—reassessed their litigation risks and rule-making approaches. The outcome was not just a pause in activity or a full retreat to unilateral actions, but a swift, practical fragmentation of global trade governance. Members did not abandon rules-based cooperation; instead, they pursued it through new, parallel channels that seemed more politically feasible and dependable than the immobilised core institution.

The most direct and notable institutional innovation was the Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement (MPIA), formally established in April 2020. Conceived by the European Union and Canada and later joined by China, Brazil, Australia, and over 20 other members representing more than half of global trade, the MPIA exemplifies a textbook minilateral workaround (Bown, 2021). Its design intentionally relies on the existing WTO legal framework: It invokes Article 25 of the Dispute Settlement Understanding (DSU), which permits arbitration by mutual agreement. This enabled members to create a shadow Appellate Body, mimicking its function through a panel of 10 standing arbitrators, but operating entirely outside the consensus-based appointment process that the US had politicised (Pauwelyn, 2019a). The MPIA thus represents a quintessential "coalition of the willing"—a "politically safer" forum where like-minded states could maintain a binding, two-stage dispute resolution system insulated from the geopolitical disputes that had hindered the official AB. Its very existence indicated that a critical mass of members had lost faith in the near-term restoration of the original system and were willing to invest political capital in an alternative, thereby reinforcing the fragmentation.

At the same time, the DSS's credibility crisis accelerated pre-existing trends towards forum shopping and institutional layering across the broader trade landscape. This manifested in two primary aspects: First, the proliferation of plurilateral initiatives: Within the WTO itself, members shifted focus from the stagnant

multilateral negotiating function to “Joint Statement Initiatives” (JSIs) on e-commerce, investment facilitation, and domestic regulation of services. These plurilateral agreements, negotiated among subsets of the membership, establish patches of deeper rules within the broader WTO framework but are not universally applied (Hoekman & Sabel, 2021). They signify a move away from the single undertaking and its associated hold-up issues, enabling coalitions to push forward new rules without being blocked by consensus-based opposition. This effectively creates a two-speed WTO, further diminishing the institution’s coherence and universality.

Second, the renormalisation of regionalism and bilateralism: Major economies intensified efforts to establish or modernise regional trade agreements (RTAs) as primary tools for rule-making and dispute resolution. Agreements such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and the EU’s network of modern FTAs have gained renewed strategic significance. These agreements not only feature their own, often more efficient, dispute settlement mechanisms but also create competing regulatory standards (Baccini, 2019). This shift strengthens regional Hegemonics and results in a complex “spaghetti bowl” of overlapping rules, enabling states to bypass the WTO forum entirely for many contentious issues.

The credibility-governance feedback loop (see Table 1) was clearly illustrated in this sequence. The paralysed AB (Stage 3: Credibility Depletion) directly triggered the creation of the MPIA and hastened the emergence of plurilateralism (Stage 4: Institutional Bypass). This bypass, in turn, produced a distorted institutional balance: As states invested in and normalised these alternative forums, the urgent political need to resolve the AB crisis lessened (Stage 5: Reinforced Vulnerability). Why risk a politically sensitive confrontation with the United States to restore the AB when a working, albeit fragmented, workaround system is already in place? As a result, efforts to negotiate AB reform within the WTO have remained deadlocked, deepening the paralysis. The feedback loop is therefore complete: The initial act of geopolitical SPC created conditions that encouraged behaviours which now make the full recovery of the original institution less likely, locking in a new, fragmented state for global trade governance. This dynamic highlights the most damaging effect of the dilemma: It does not just cause temporary harm to an institution; it reconfigures the institutional environment in ways that make the damage semi-permanent.

The WHO and the Politicisation of Pandemic Science

Phase 1: The geopolitical trigger—The US-China COVID-19 “Blame Game”:

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged amid intense US-China strategic competition. The search for the virus’s origins quickly became geopoliticized. The Trump administration, alongside other governments, promoted the “lab-leak” hypothesis while accusing China of a cover-up and the WHO of complicity (Bolsen & Palm, 2020). China, in turn, aggressively promoted counter-narratives about possible overseas origins and portrayed itself as a transparent partner. The WHO’s technical mandate—to coordinate the international scientific response—was thus injected with high-voltage geopolitical tension from the outset, with each superpower seeking to weaponise the origins question (Han, 2021).

Phase 2: Strategic procedural contestation—Demanding a politicised investigation:

The United States’ actions represented a classic case of Strategic Procedural Contestation (SPC), where procedural demands were weaponised to serve geopolitical objectives rather than achieve scientific clarity. This was not a typical request for a World Health Organisation (WHO) technical mission under the International Health Regulations (IHR). Instead, it was a politically charged manoeuvre aimed at shaping the narrative,

assigning blame, and pressuring both the WHO Secretariat and China. The trigger was a letter from President Donald Trump to the WHO Director-General on 18 May 2020, which escalated into a formal notice of withdrawal from the organisation. The letter accused the WHO of “severely mismanaging and covering up the spread of the coronavirus”, claiming it had “consistently ignored credible reports of the virus spreading in Wuhan in early December 2019 or even earlier” (The White House, 2020). The demand was not for collaborative scientific investigation but for a retrospective, punitive audit of the WHO’s performance, explicitly framed around the agency’s supposed complicity with China. This transformed a public health inquiry into a procedural battleground, where the words “transparent” and “independent” were politically coded to suggest that the WHO’s existing processes were inadequate.

Meanwhile, China employed a defensive stance in the SPC, using its sovereign rights and procedural influence as the host nation to control and influence the international investigation. According to IHR and WHO protocols for outbreak investigations, host-country approval and cooperation are crucial. China used this to negotiate the scope, composition, and timeline of the international team. It insisted that the investigation be called a “global study of origins” rather than a China-focused probe, and that the team work under a jointly agreed “Chinese mandate” that prioritised food and cold-chain transmission hypotheses favoured by Chinese officials (WHO, 2021a). Beijing’s approach aimed to contain and deflect: By controlling access to key sites, data, and personnel (including Chinese scientists instructed to coordinate all communications with foreign experts through government channels), it sought to direct the technical process away from politically sensitive topics, especially those involving the Wuhan Institute of Virology (Graham, 2021).

The WHO’s Secretariat, led by Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, found itself caught in a geopolitical crossfire, confronting conflicting procedural demands. From the US, it faced pressure for a quick, confrontational inquiry. From China, it encountered conditions for cooperation that restricted the investigation’s scope and independence. This positioned the agency at the very heart of the credibility-governance dilemma. Fully complying with US demands risked alienating China, depriving investigators of all access, and breaching the principles of cooperation outlined in the IHR. Conversely, accepting China’s strict conditions risked producing a scientifically compromised report that both we and our allies would dismiss as a whitewash. The WHO’s efforts to navigate this—by agreeing to a jointly managed mission with China while repeatedly calling for broader access—ultimately failed to satisfy either side, turning the scientific process itself into a focal point of political dispute and thereby undermining trust in the institution responsible for overseeing it.

Phase 3: The WHO’s dilemma and credibility erosion—Leaning toward Path A (acquiescence):

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus faced a difficult choice. To keep access and cooperation from China for an important early investigation, the WHO agreed to a jointly organised “WHO-convened global study of origins” in July 2020, with terms negotiated with Beijing. Chinese officials accompanied the international team’s January 2021 mission to Wuhan, and its subsequent report, while useful, described a lab leak as “extremely unlikely” and was widely viewed as influenced by Chinese political limits on the scientists (WHO, 2021a). When the US and others criticised the report as inadequate, DG Tedros then shifted position, saying that the mission had not been thorough enough and calling for more research, including into the lab hypothesis, seemingly yielding to US pressure (Ghebreyesus, 2021).

The WHO’s navigation through the geopolitical crossfire did not result in a clear victory for science but rather in a severe crisis of perceived compromise. By trying to appease both superpowers at different times, the organisation only managed to convince each that it had capitulated to the other, thus severely undermining its

claim to impartial, science-led authority. This Path A approach—opting for acquiescence—led to the exact credibility loss predicted by the dilemma.

Perceptions of compromise were divided along geopolitical lines. In the United States, among its allies, and within a substantial part of the Western scientific and political commentariat, the initial joint mission agreement and the subsequent March 2021 report were seen as the result of extreme Chinese coercion. The report's conclusion that a laboratory origin was “doubtful” was dismissed not solely on scientific grounds, but as a politically motivated finding. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken described the report's process as “insufficient and inadequate”, claiming China had “not provided the necessary transparency” (U.S. Department of State, 2021). This group regarded the WHO Secretariat as having relinquished its investigative independence to maintain access, sacrificing its integrity to the geopolitical influence of a member state.

Conversely, in China and among its diplomatic supporters, Director-General Tedros's public statements immediately after the report's release were seen as a betrayal and a capitulation to Western pressure. On 30 March 2021, Tedros stated that the report's lab-leak assessment needed further investigation, saying, “I do not believe that this assessment was extensive enough... All hypotheses remain on the table” (WHO, 2021b). Beijing saw this as the Director-General yielding to a politically motivated campaign led by the US, unjustly reopening a settled issue and legitimising what it considered a baseless, stigmatising theory. From their perspective, the WHO had forsaken the principles of objectivity and cooperation to appease an antagonistic power seeking to deflect blame.

The consequence of this dual perception was a severe erosion of the WHO's primary asset: its scientific credibility. Trust in the organisation as an honest broker and a source of unimpeachable technical guidance vanished among key constituencies. This was clearly demonstrated by the open letter published in *Science* in May 2021, signed by 18 leading scientists—and later supported by hundreds more—which argued that the origins investigation lacked “the independence, the necessary accesses, and the timeliness required for a full and unrestricted investigation” (Bloom et al., 2021). This rebuke from within the global epistemic community signalled a profound loss of confidence in the institution's capacity to safeguard scientific processes from political interference.

The media narrative solidified the credibility collapse. Influential outlets framed the episode not as a scientific challenge but as a diplomatic and institutional failure. As Kickbusch and Holzscheiter (2021) observed, escalating conflicts between the United States and China not only weakened the World Health Organization but also paralyzed broader multilateral cooperation. This framing transcended the specifics of the origins debate, cementing a public perception of the WHO as a politically pliable organisation rather than a steadfast guardian of global health science. The damage was systemic: Future WHO directives, scientific assessments, and crisis communications would now be filtered through a lens of heightened suspicion, directly impairing its operational effectiveness during an ongoing pandemic and diminishing its capacity to lead in future global health emergencies. The Path A choice had devalued the institution's credibility currency, leaving it functionally impoverished in the arena where it needed it most.

Phase 4: Feedback loop and institutional bypass—Mini-lateral health security ascendant:

The severe erosion of the WHO's credibility as an impartial scientific coordinator did not create a governance vacuum. Instead, it sped up and justified a pre-existing strategic shift towards institutional bypass. Key states, disillusioned by the politicisation of the origins investigation and the perceived shortcomings of the early international COVID-19 response, directed political capital and resources into alternative, minilateral, and

bilateral frameworks seen as more agile, manageable, and aligned with narrow national interests. This move signified a deliberate fragmentation of the global health security architecture, reinforcing the cycle where loss of credibility leads to institutional circumvention.

The Global Health Security Agenda (GHSA), launched by the Obama administration in 2014, was revitalised as a primary mechanism for this bypass. Unlike the WHO's universal, one-state-one-vote assembly, the GHSA functions as a voluntary, multi-stakeholder partnership involving over 70 countries, international organisations, and private sector entities. In the wake of the WHO's credibility crisis, it was framed as a technocratic, "apolitical" alternative model. U.S. officials have positioned GHSA as enabling "action-oriented cooperation" outside Geneva's diplomatic constraints, explicitly contrasting it with the WHO's contested processes (Katz et al., 2014). Its "Action Packages"—which target specific threats such as antimicrobial resistance or zoonotic diseases—allow like-minded states to coordinate capacity-building and information-sharing through flexible, opt-in coalitions, effectively creating parallel functional networks that operate outside the WHO's normative and coordinating framework.

This mini-lateral surge was complemented by great-power-led, ad-hoc summit diplomacy that deliberately sidelined the WHO's convening role. The United States organised two major Global COVID-19 Summits (in September 2021 and May 2022), bringing together coalitions to pledge vaccines, funds, and political commitments to end the pandemic. These summits, coordinated from Washington, established new governance mechanisms, such as the Global Action Plan for COVID-19 Therapeutics and the Global COVID-19 Access (ACT-A) Accelerator's Facilitation Council, creating competing centres of initiative and oversight (Kickbusch & Liu, 2022). Similarly, the European Union leveraged its financial heft to pursue bilateral "vaccine diplomacy" partnerships with production hubs such as South Africa and Latin America. Meanwhile, the African Union established the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) as a continental technical body, partly in response to perceived WHO failings in equity and timely response during the pandemic (Makoni, 2020).

Crucially, these actions did not represent an abandonment of the WHO in all functions—states continued to depend on its technical normative work on disease classification and its field operations in low-income settings. However, they indicated a significant reallocation of trust and strategic reliance. For the most politically sensitive and resource-heavy aspects of pandemic preparedness and response—origin investigations, pathogen access and benefit-sharing (PABS), the coordination of countermeasures, and the attribution of failure—central states showed they would no longer treat the WHO as the indispensable, primary hub. As the European Council on Foreign Relations noted, the outcome is a "hub-and-spoke system" where the WHO is just one spoke among many, rather than the central hub (EFCR, 2022).

This behavioural shift completes and strengthens the politicisation-credibility feedback loop. The credibility-damaged WHO (Stage 3: Credibility Depletion) led states to invest in the GHSA, summit diplomacy, and regional bodies (Stage 4: Institutional Bypass). This diversion of political attention, diplomatic effort, and—crucially—financial resources away from Geneva weakens the WHO's operational capacity and political standing (Stage 5: Reinforced Vulnerability). A financially constrained and politically marginalised WHO is then even less capable of resisting future geopolitical pressure during the next crisis, increasing the likelihood of a debilitating credibility-governance dilemma. Thus, the initial act of SPC sets in motion a cycle that structurally diminishes the universal institution, fostering a fragmented, state-dominated health security order where scientific coordination remains permanently subordinated to geopolitical convenience.

Discussion

The process-tracing of the WTO and WHO crises provides strong empirical support for the credibility-governance dilemma model. The hypothesised causal sequence unfolded clearly in both cases, despite differences in institutional domain and the specific choice made at the crux of the dilemma.

Confirmation of the Hypothesised Mechanism

- H1 (Geopolitical trigger): Confirmed. In both cases, the escalating US-China rivalry provided the essential context and motivation for contestation, turning technical domains into proxy battlegrounds for broader strategic competition (Allison, 2017).
- H2 (Strategic procedural contestation): Confirmed. The US blockade of AB appointments (WTO) and the demand for a politically charged origins investigation (WHO) are classic examples of SPC—using institutional rules as tools to attain geopolitical aims (Morse & Keohane, 2014).
- H3 (Credibility erosion): Confirmed. Both organisations experienced significant credibility loss, albeit in different ways. The WTO AB's credibility was diminished through incapacitation (Path B), while the WHO's was diminished through perceived compromise (Path A). In both cases, rhetorical attacks increased, the epistemic community voiced serious concerns, and media narratives became more negative (Tallberg & Zürn, 2019).
- H4 (Institutional bypass): Confirmed. The Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement (MPIA) and the surge in plurilateralism followed the AB's paralysis (Hoekman & Mavroidis, 2021). The Global Health Security Agenda (GHSA) and US-led summits gained momentum after the WHO's credibility crisis (Katz, Sorrell, Kornblet, & Fischer, 2014). This bypass is not merely a coincidence but a logical functional response to the failure of the universal body's credible authority (Vabulas & Snidal, 2021).

The cross-case comparison reveals a crucial insight: The specific choice made at the dilemma (acquiescence vs. integrity) influences the type of credibility loss (compromise vs. impotence) but not the outcomes of depletion and bypass. This finding reinforces the central theoretical argument: Introducing geopolitical rivalry into technical fields creates a structural lose-lose situation for the IO, undermining its authority regardless of the tactical decisions made by its secretariat.

Theoretical Contributions and Refinements

This analysis advances several key theoretical debates. First, it pushes the literature on the “politicisation” of international organisations (IOs) beyond mere description. While existing work often merely describes the phenomenon of politicisation (Zürn, 2018), this article identifies a causal mechanism—the sequence of Strategic Politicised Contestation (SPC), a resultant credibility dilemma, and an institutional feedback loop—that explains how politicisation concretely leads to institutional decay.

Second, this analysis combines different scholarly debates on authority and contestation. It connects the literature on the epistemic authority of IOs (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004) with the study of contestation in global governance (Morse & Keohane, 2014), showing how epistemic authority becomes a deliberate target of contestation. In doing so, it highlights credibility as the key link that turns geopolitical conflict into tangible institutional change.

Finally, the article offers a theoretical explanation of institutional fragmentation. It provides a microfoundational account of the macrophenomenon of regime complexity and fragmentation (Alter & Raustiala, 2018). The argument suggests that fragmentation is not just a voluntary design choice but often a systemic result of credibility

issues within universal bodies. This failure, in turn, is driven by states' practical needs for effective governance, prompting them to seek alternative institutional venues.

A refined theoretical insight emerges: The vulnerability of an IO to this dilemma increases when its technical authority is high, but its political insulation is low. Both the WTO's AB (an independent judiciary) and the WHO's scientific secretariat held high epistemic authority. Nevertheless, they were ultimately susceptible to the raw political power of their most influential members when those members chose to weaponise procedures. This highlights a fundamental tension between the need for expert autonomy and the political reality of member state sovereignty.

Boundary Conditions: When Might IOs Avoid the Dilemma?

The model's potency indicates the conditions under which IOs might be more resilient to strategic politicisation challenges. The dilemma becomes most severe when three particular factors converge.

First, the high geopolitical significance of the issue area makes IOs prime targets. When an IO's core functions directly intersect with a great power's security or economic dominance—such as in trade superiority, biosecurity, or nuclear technology—it faces increased pressure. Conversely, IOs operating in less prominent technical fields, such as the International Telecommunication Union on spectrum allocation or the World Meteorological Organisation, may enjoy greater autonomy as they are not seen as threatening key geopolitical interests (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2021).

Second, high institutional insulation acts as a protective buffer. IOs with strong bureaucratic independence, secured funding, and decision-making rules that limit veto opportunities for great powers are better shielded. For example, the European Central Bank, though not a global IO, shows how high technical independence can guard against direct political interference. Similarly, the International Court of Justice, with its fixed-term judges and foundational statute, has notable, though not complete, insulation.

Third, the presence of consensual knowledge and low outcome uncertainty diminishes vulnerability. When the scientific or technical basis for action is uncontroversial and outcomes are foreseeable, politicisation becomes more challenging. The dilemma worsens when knowledge is disputed or uncertain, as with debates over pandemic origins, or when legal interpretation has clear distributive consequences, such as in WTO rulings on subsidies. These conditions create discursive space for geopolitical framing (Zürn, 2018)

An IO operating in an area of low salience with high insulation and consensual knowledge is less likely to trigger the entire credibility-governance dilemma. However, it may still face political pressure.

Ruling out Alternative Explanations

To strengthen the causal claim that geopolitical rivalry via strategic procedural confrontation (SPC) drives the crisis, it is necessary to consider and refute alternative explanations for the observed outcomes in the WTO and WHO cases.

One alternative explanation is pure institutional dysfunction. One could argue that the Appellate Body (AB) was blocked by longstanding, apolitical concerns about judicial overreach, and that the WHO failed due to inherent bureaucratic inertia. However, this explanation cannot account for the timing and selectivity of the attacks. The US's detailed legal criticisms of the AB have existed for over a decade. Nevertheless, they were only weaponised through a blanket appointment blockade simultaneously with the launch of the trade war against China (Hillman, 2020). Similarly, criticisms of the WHO bureaucracy are ongoing. However, the unprecedented

public accusations of a “cover-up” and the withholding of funds were directly linked to the US-China blame game over COVID-19 origins (Fidler, 2021). The geopolitical trigger is crucial for explaining the shift from critique to paralysis.

A second alternative is changing state interests without geopolitics. A rational institutionalist might suggest that states reassess the costs and benefits of supporting strong multilateral institutions. While interests evolved, the process-tracing indicates this was not merely an isolated cost-benefit analysis. The change was relational and strategic; the importance of constraining the rival through the IO, or of escaping constraints imposed by the IO perceived as favouring the rival, became a key interest. The shift was not away from cooperation per se, but towards forum-shopping for more advantageous, less confrontational settings—a move driven by rivalry.

Finally, attributing the situation solely to domestic politics is an inadequate explanation. While domestic populism and anti-globalist sentiments in the US played a role, they cannot be considered the sole factors. A purely domestic politics narrative fails to explain why pressure was so precisely directed at procedures affecting the relationship with China (such as AB rulings on Chinese practices and the origins investigation in Wuhan), nor why other states echoed this by forming alternative coalitions. Domestic politics created a permissive environment, but the targeting of IO procedures was strategically aimed at a geopolitical adversary.

Generalizability and a Future Research Agenda

The credibility-governance dilemma provides a valuable framework for future research on international institutions. Although the shadow cases of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) indicate their broader applicability, a more structured research approach is required. Three specific avenues for future investigation arise.

First, future research could conduct a large-N mapping of Strategic Procedural Contestation (SPC) and credibility indicators. This would involve creating quantitative measures of SPC—such as the frequency of vetoes on appointments, politically motivated treaty withdrawals, or votes against consensus on technical reports—and of credibility, using tools like expert survey ratings or media sentiment analysis. A broad study across international organisations could then examine the relationship between geopolitical rivalry in an issue area, the occurrence of SPC, and observable declines in an institution’s credibility and utilisation (Debre & Dijkstra, 2021).

A second approach involves a comparative analysis of IO resilience. Research should explore why some institutions handle geopolitical pressures better than others, examining cases of apparent resilience—such as the IMF during the Eurozone crisis amid US-Europe tensions—through the lens of the theory’s boundary conditions. This comparative study would help improve the theoretical framework and pinpoint specific institutional design features that boost insulation without compromising effectiveness.

Finally, future research should investigate the role of agency and leadership. While this article concentrates on structural dynamics, an essential next step is to explore how IO leaders and secretariats actively manage the dilemma. Scholars could examine the conditions under which entrepreneurial leadership—through skilful framing, coalition-building, or procedural innovation—can reduce credibility losses or even restore legitimacy to a contested organisation. A process-tracing study of agencies such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) or the IPCC during the Paris Agreement negotiations could shed light on these agency-driven pathways for maintaining credibility amid great-power rivalry.

Policy Implications: Can the Dilemma Be Managed?

In an era of mounting great power rivalry, are international organisations (IOs) doomed? Not necessarily. Their survival, however, depends on a clear shift from passive victimhood to active stewardship of their own credibility. The analysis proposes several strategic imperatives to achieve this.

First, IOs must pursue proactive insulation by establishing robust firewalls. This involves formalising and legally safeguarding the independence of technical bodies—such as the WTO’s Appellate Body (AB)—from political interference. Additionally, creating clear ethical charters for investigations and audits, along with diversifying funding sources to reduce the coercive influence of any single member state, is essential step towards operational autonomy (Bermann & Wirth, 2020).

Secondly, IOs should adopt transparency as a strategic shield. In a climate of deep mistrust, radical procedural transparency can strip the shadows in which strategic power struggles flourish. This entails publishing all member submissions, recording and making key discussions accessible, and regularly disclosing conflicts of interest. Such practices establish a credible public record of impartiality and deny critics easy grounds for accusations.

Finally, IO leadership must focus on building coalitions of credible actors. This involves actively nurturing groups that are vested in maintaining institutional integrity. A key strategy is to strengthen partnerships with epistemic communities, civil society, and, crucially, middle powers that depend on a rules-based system and can act as a stabilising bloc against significant power pressures (Bermann & Wirth, 2020).

The key lesson is that in the 21st century, the fight for the future of multilateralism will be determined by credibility, not just capability. IOs that see their credibility as a vital strategic asset to protect, rather than just a byproduct of their role, will be best placed to survive in the age of competition.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the crises engulfing international organisations such as the WTO and the WHO are not merely symptoms of a general “backlash” against multilateralism. They result from a specific, harmful causal process called the credibility-governance dilemma. When geopolitical rivalry between great powers intrudes on the technical core of an IO, it forces the organisation into an impossible choice: either compromise its neutrality or face paralysis. Both options weaken its most vital resource: the credibility derived from its perceived expertise and impartiality. This weakening, in turn, creates a feedback loop, prompting member states to pursue alternative, smaller-scale arrangements that seem more politically feasible, thereby speeding up the fragmentation of global governance.

Through detailed process-tracing of the WTO Appellate Body blockade and the WHO COVID-19 origins investigation, the article has demonstrated this mechanism in action. It showed how US-China rivalry was channelled into strategic procedural contestation, how each IO faced its own version of the dilemma, and how both emerged with severely damaged authority, prompting the rapid development of institutional bypass mechanisms such as the MPIA and the strengthening of mini-lateral health security networks.

The implications are significant. The analysis indicates that the resilience of the rules-based international order depends less on the formal legal structures of its institutions and more on their capacity to maintain epistemic credibility in a hostile geopolitical context. For scholars, the credibility-governance dilemma offers a framework for examining modern institutional pressures across various fields, from nuclear non-proliferation to climate science. For policymakers within IOs and supporting member states, it highlights that safeguarding

procedural integrity and impartiality is not merely a technocratic formality but a strategic necessity for the survival of institutions.

As great power competition becomes the defining feature of international politics, technical international organisations stand at a crossroads. They can become casualties of this competition, their authority undermined by the politicisation-credibility feedback loop. Alternatively, through deliberate institutional design, coalition-building, and a steadfast commitment to transparent, evidence-based processes, they can aim to become islands of credible authority amidst a sea of geopolitical turmoil. Their success or failure will shape humanity's ability to manage collective challenges for decades to come.

References

- Abulas, F., & Snidal, D. (2021). Cooperation under autonomy: Building and analyzing the Informal Intergovernmental Organizations 2.0 dataset. *Journal of Peace Research*, 58(6), 1269-1284. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343320943920>
- Allison, G. (2017). *Destined for war: Can America and China escape Thucydides's trap?* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Alter, K. J., & Meunier, S. (2009). The politics of international regime complexity. *Perspectives on Politics*, 7(1), 13-24.
- Alter, K. J., & Raustiala, K. (2018). The rise of international regime complexity. *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, 14, 329-349. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-lawsocsci-101317-030830>
- Baccini, L. (2019). Regional trade agreements at WTO dispute settlement. *World Trade Review*, 18(1), 33-61.
- Barnett, M., & Finnemore, M. (2004). *Rules for the world: International organizations in global politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Beach, D., & Pedersen, R. B. (2019). *Process-tracing methods: Foundations and guidelines* (2nd ed.). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Bermann, G., & Wirth, T. (2020). Strengthening independence and autonomy in WTO adjudication. *The future of international economic law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bloom, J. D., Chan, Y. A., Baric, R. S., Bjorkman, P. J., Cobey, S., Deverman, B. E., ... Relman, D. A. (2021). Investigate the origins of COVID-19. *Science*, 372(6543), 694. doi:10.1126/science.abj0016
- Bolsen, T., & Palm, R. (2020). Framing the origins of COVID-19. *Science Communication*, 42(5), 562-588.
- Bown, C. P. (2021). The US-China trade war and phase one agreement. *Journal of Policy Modeling*, 43(1), 805-843.
- Capoccia, G., & Kelemen, R. D. (2007). The study of critical junctures: Theory, narrative, and counterfactuals in historical institutionalism. *World Politics*, 59(3), 341-369.
- China Daily. (2025, April 29). COVID-19 prevention, control and origins tracing: China's actions. Retrieved from <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202505/01/WS6812d78ea310a04af22bd2eb.html>
- Collier, D. (2011). Understanding process tracing. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 44(4), 823-830.
- Debre, M. J., & Dijkstra, H. (2021). Institutional design for a post-liberal order: why some international organizations live longer than others. *European Journal of International Relations*, 27(1), 311-339. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066120962183>
- Dellmuth, L. M., Scholte, J. A., & Tallberg, J. (2019). Institutional sources of legitimacy for international organisations: Beyond procedure versus performance. *Review of International Studies*, 45(4), 627-646. doi:10.1017/S026021051900007X
- Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, M. (2021). What kills international organisations? When and why international organisations get terminated. *European Journal of International Relations*, 27(4), 1229-1253. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066120932976>
- European Council on Foreign Relations (2022). *Health of nations: How Europe can fight future pandemics*. February 16, 2022. Retrieved from <https://ecfr.eu/publication/health-of-nations-how-europe-can-fight-future-pandemics/>
- European External Action Service (EEAS). (2020). No to vaccine nationalism, yes to vaccine multilateralism. Retrieved from https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/no-vaccine-nationalism-yes-vaccine-multilateralism_en
- Fidler, D. P. (2021). The past, present, and future of global health law beyond crisis. *American Journal of International Law*, 115(4), 673-678.
- Financial Times. (2019, December 9). WTO to suffer heavy blow as US stymies appeals body.
- George, A. L., & Bennett, A. (2005). *Case studies and theory development in the social sciences*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Gerring, J. (2007). *Case study research: Principles and practices*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Ghebreyesus, T. A. (2021). Statements on COVID-19 origin investigations. WHO Press Briefings and Public Statements. Various dates.
- Graham, L. (2021, May 25). Statement on lab leak investigation push. *U.S. Senate*. Retrieved from <https://www.lgraham.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2021/5/graham-we-need-investigation-of-lab-leak-as-possible-origin-of-covid-19-virus-threatens-sanctions>
- Haas, P. M. (1992). Introduction: Epistemic communities and international policy coordination. *International Organization*, 46(1), 1-35.
- Han, E. (2021). The COVID-19 origins blame game: Politicisation and weaponisation of narratives. *Global Public Health*, 16(10), 1528-1539.
- Hillman, J. (2020). *A reset of the World Trade Organization's appellate body*. New York: Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved from <https://www.cfr.org/report/reset-world-trade-organizations-appellate-body>
- Hoekman, B., & Mavroidis, P. C. (2021). Informing WTO reform: Dispute settlement performance, 1995-2020. *Journal of World Trade*, 55(1), 1-28.
- Hoekman, B., & Sabel, C. (2021). Plurilateral cooperation as an alternative to trade agreements: Can JSIs revitalize the WTO? *Global Policy*, 12(S3), 51-62.
- Hopewell, K. (2021). *Clash of powers: US-China rivalry in global trade governance*. Haven: Yale University Press.
- Hurd, I. (2007). Breaking and making norms: American revisionism and crises of legitimacy. *International Organization*, 61(4), 687-716.
- Ikenberry, G. J. (2018). The end of liberal international order? *International Affairs*, 94(1), 7-23. doi:10.1093/ia/iix241
- Kahler, M. (2018). Global governance: Three futures. *International Studies Review*, 20(2), 239-246.
- Katz, R., Sorrell, E. M., Kornblet, S. A., & Fischer, J. E. (2014). Global health security agenda and the international health regulations: Moving forward. *Biosecurity and Bioterrorism: Biodefense Strategy, Practice, and Science*, 12(5), 231-238. doi:10.1089/bsp.2014.0038
- Keohane, R. O. (1984). *After hegemony: Cooperation and discord in the world political economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kickbusch, I., & Holzscheiter, A. (2021). Can geopolitics derail the pandemic treaty? *BMJ*, 375, e069129. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj-2021-069129>
- Kickbusch, I., & Liu, A. (2022). Global health diplomacy—Reconstructing power and governance. *The Lancet*, 399(10336), 2108-2114.
- Kugler, J. (2022, June 9). Mysteries linger about COVID's origins, W.H.O. report says. *The New York Times*.
- Lighthizer, R. E. (2020). *Report on the appellate body of the World Trade Organization*. Washington: Office of the United States Trade Representative.
- Makoni, M. (2020). Africa's response to COVID-19: What role for Africa CDC? *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*, 20(9), 1015-1016.
- Mavroidis, P. C., & Sapir, A. (2021). *China and the WTO: Why multilateralism still matters*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Morse, J. C., & Keohane, R. O. (2014). Contested multilateralism. *Rev Int Organ*, 9, 385-412. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-014-9188-2>
- Pauwelyn, J. (2019a). The Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement (MPIA) as a sub-optimal solution to restore WTO dispute settlement. *Journal of International Economic Law*, 22(1), 169-185.
- Pauwelyn, J. (2019b). WTO dispute settlement post 2019: What to expect? What choice to make? *Journal of International Economic Law*, 22(4), 1039-1060.
- Petersmann, E.-U. (2018). How should the EU and other WTO members react to the US example of unilateral judicial "Overreach" and judicial avoidance? *EUI Department of Law Research Paper No. RSCAS 2018/71*. Fiesole: European University Institute.
- Scharpf, F. W. (1999). *Governing in Europe: Effective and democratic?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tallberg, J., & Zürn, M. (2019). The legitimacy and legitimation of international organizations: Introduction and framework. *The Review of International Organizations*, 14(4), 581-600.
- The White House. (2020, May 18). Letter from President Donald J. Trump to WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. Retrieved from <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Tedros-Letter.pdf>
- U.S. Department of State. (2021, April 10). Ensuring a transparent, thorough investigation of COVID-19's origin. Retrieved from <https://2017-2021.state.gov/ensuring-a-transparent-thorough-investigation-of-covid-19s-origin/>
- Vabulas, F., & Snidal, D. (2021). Cooperation under autonomy: Building and analyzing the Informal Intergovernmental Organizations 2.0 dataset. *Journal of Peace Research*, 58(4), 859-869.
- Van den Bossche, P. (2018). The demise of the WTO appellate body: Lessons for governance of international adjudication? *WTO Working Paper No. 02/2021* (presented/discussed 2018; formal pub. 2021). Geneva: World Trade Organization.

- World Health Organization. (2021a). WHO-convened global study of origins of SARS-CoV-2: China part. January 14-February 10, 2021. Retrieved from https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/final-joint-report_origins-studies-6-april-201.pdf
- World Health Organization. (2021b). WHO calls for further studies, data on origin of SARS-CoV-2 virus, reiterates that all hypotheses remain open. 30 March 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/news/item/30-03-2021-who-calls-for-further-studies-data-on-origin-of-sars-cov-2-virus-reiterates-that-all-hypotheses-remain-open>
- Zürn, M. (2018). Contested global governance. *Global Policy*, 9(1), 138-145. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12521>