

Geopolitical Organizations and International Employees: Geopolitics and International  
Organizations from Individual Organization Employees

By Oliver C.D. Rudmann

Department of International Relations, Central European University

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Supervised by Professor Michael Merlingen

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores and expresses the perspectives of those who work within international organizations on the impact of geopolitical interests upon their work, identifying gaps in existing literature. First, it highlights the implications of the experiences of those working in international organizations regarding the theories of geopolitics as applied to international organizations. Several individuals were interviewed for their perspectives on their work involving geopolitical policy using a semi-structured design. Secondly, the paper will examine the personal perspectives of the interview subjects, discussing their experiences and attitudes when confronting the geopolitical aspects of their work in their organizations and demonstrating the everyday practices used by them in this area of international relations. The paper concludes with identification of missing areas in existing literature and makes suggestions for future research.

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## Introduction

International organizations are a long-established part of the modern global order. While the structures we know as states remain the foundational building-blocks for global structures and interactions, international organizations have successfully developed an area all their own, being comprised of participating states while remaining independent entities from those states. These organizations facilitate international discourses in forms significantly distinct to what preceded their development. While various theories of international relations attribute different degrees of importance to international organizations and their activities, it remains difficult to imagine the world in its current form or similar existing without the presence of the numerous organizations that are active in the world today.

The development of international organizations as significant actors on the world stage has encouraged the development of several academic inquiries interrogating the place of international organizations and their functions, particularly through the lens of geopolitical theory. Especially at current, as international tensions are growing in quantity and prominence and placing increasing strain upon post-Cold-War systems and assumptions about the direction of the future, the geopolitical interests of states have been increasingly identified as a source of difficulty for international organizations. The question of how international organizations are going to come to terms with the pressures that result from states that are increasingly bringing to bear competing geopolitical agendas has come to the forefront of discussion. International organizations find themselves in a position where participating states will use them as both platform and battleground, forced to navigate through a world with increasingly fewer and narrower areas of unitary or majority international agreement.

The established discourse on this geopolitical impact upon the operations of international organizations has much to say regarding the activities of those organizations as whole entities, but largely overlooks the perspectives of the individuals who make up the organizations. These individuals are responsible for developing and implementing the projects of their organizations. They directly encounter and engage with the struggles with geopolitical interests these organizations experience and regularly work to navigate the complex interweaving of competing states in pursuit of the organizations' mandates and goals. From these experiences arises a unique and valuable perspective on the geopoliticization of international organizations that the academic literature has yet to recognize.

This paper seeks to explore and express the perspectives of those who work within international organizations on the impact of geopolitical interests upon their work. The paper first seeks to highlight the implications of the experiences of those working in international organizations regarding the theories of geopolitics as applied to international organizations, particularly where those experiences highlight apparent gaps in the existing literature. This will indicate areas in need of further in-depth research and theoretical development. Additionally, the paper will examine the personal perspectives of the interview subjects, discussing their experiences and attitudes when confronting the geopolitical aspects of their work in their organizations and demonstrating the everyday practices used by them in this area of international relations.

## **Methodology**

To develop this paper a series of interviews with individuals who were working in international organizations at the time of the interview were conducted. These interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format. A list of basic questions that sought to probe the

interview subjects' awareness and identification of geopolitics in their regular work as well as their personal reactions to the introduction of geopolitics to their work were developed by the author. Questions included "In your experience, have you encountered situations when geopolitical concerns were brought into your work?" and "Have you ever had a proposal you developed or were otherwise invested in fail because of that kind of geopolitical interference? Would you be willing to describe how you felt about that?" These questions experienced some variation between interview subjects, namely changing the way the organization that the interview subjects worked for was referred to in order to account for the different organizations that the interview subjects worked for as well as to remove questions that the interview subjects expressed clear reservations about providing answers to. After hearing an interview subject's answer to a question on the list the interviewer would ask follow-up questions as warranted to further explore the interview subject's answer and perspective.

Four interviews were held, three with individuals who worked in various branches of the United Nations, specifically the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), and one individual who worked in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The interview subjects all held positions which entailed working with the development, proposal, and implementation of resolutions and projects by their organizations, and were all mid-career with multiple years of prior experience working with and for international organizations. All interview subjects participated in the understanding that their participation and statements would be kept anonymous. All subjects were made aware before the interviews that they could refuse to answer any questions that they did not feel

comfortable providing answers to, and that they could revoke their involvement in the paper at any point. The interviews were approximately an hour long each.

## **Literature Review**

In this section, I consider classic and modern perspectives in geopolitics and the connection between geopolitics and international organizations with a particular focus on the United Nations. In doing so I explore the current status of the literature on these subjects and establish the modern position of the theories commonly used to discuss geopolitics and international organizations. I highlight the lack of connection in the literature between geopoliticization, international organizations, and individual members of those organizations.

When asking the question of geopolitical influences on the functioning and decision-making of the United Nations and international organizations one naturally finds themselves at a crossroads between geopolitical theory and theory-crafting and analysis of the United Nations and international organizations more broadly. The area of this point of intersection is startlingly under-explored, with geopolitical theory leaving the United Nations broadly unaddressed while works that engage with the United Nations discuss how the organization as a whole might charter a course through global geopolitical concerns as opposed to how and to what extent those concerns permeate through the organization. Despite the clear mechanisms by which individual state geopolitical concerns might be brought into the organization's functioning, from direct national representations to more subtle means of influence, the literature largely fails to substantively draw the resulting link.

The field of geopolitics has an extensive history and has been developed and iterated on since its first inception. First developed in the late nineteenth century, in broad sense it focuses upon how the physical realities of the world and the environment in which states are placed

affects those states' behaviors and interactions with the world (Parker, Geoffrey, pgs. 1-2). In this way the state and its behavior is contextualized within and emergent from the world within and around it. Since the field's revival in the late 1970s in France (Parker, pg. 46), the field has held the view that "states [are] the result of the dynamic interaction between human and physical phenomena" (Parker, pg. 48). Further insights in the field emerge through focusing upon specific aspects of the meeting between geography and politics.

The development of the branches of geopolitics known as critical and constructivist geopolitics has advanced and solidified a pivot from strict geographical interpretation and implementation of geopolitics. Contrary to classical geopolitics, which takes the spatial geographies of the world as plain fact with the behavior of states in seeking international advantage arising from geographic circumstances in a format of natural law, "geopolitics is understood by critical geopolitics as a social phenomenon; the geopolitical discourse, represented by the actors of international politics." (Fard, Rebin, pg. 38) This produces an emphasis on how geopolitical reality arises from the way involved parties discuss the geopolitical. Constructivist geopolitics further builds on this through a partial rapprochement between classical and critical geopolitics, allowing special factors and the environment as realities to be engaged with while also asserting that "[...] space, as an unchangeable leading category, must be critically questioned and rather presented as a socio-historical phenomenon. Boundaries that are taken for granted and other apparent facts are problematised." (Fard, pg. 45) Both of these perspectives indicate that geopolitics can be seen not only as a terminology and expression of the physical realities of states, but also as a way of discussing states, their interests, and their behaviors. This allows the activities and motivations of geopolitics to be perceived and examined in the context of social spaces and spaces of discussion rather than strictly physical spaces.

Taking the theory of critical geopolitics' conceptualization of geopolitics as normative behaviors a step further, we may introduce the term *geopoliticization* as an extant system being bent towards or realized as having an impact upon the geopolitical status of states.

Geopoliticization sees a system or area of discussion adopt increasing use of terminology and patterns of discourse derived from or parallel to those of geopolitics. Where a system may previously have been seen as above or otherwise outside the area of geopolitics, the process of geopoliticization makes visible and enhances the strains of geopolitical concerns acting upon and within said system. This process then brings the lenses of geopolitical analysis to relevant bearing upon areas often viewed as not geopolitical by nature, such as international organizations.

International organizations are structures that exist between different states in a formal capacity, being strictly defined as "organizations that include at least three states among their membership, that have activities in several states, and that are created through a formal intergovernmental agreement such as a treaty, charter, or statute." (Karns, Margaret P., and Karen A. Mingst, pg. 5) International organizations can be further distinguished from other international institutions by their possession of "[...] centralization (a concrete and stable organizational structure and an administrative apparatus managing collective activities) and independence (the authority to act with a degree of autonomy, and often with neutrality, in defined spheres)." (Abbott, Kenneth W., and Duncan Snidal, pg. 15) Individual international organizations are typically assigned specific areas of mandate in which to operate, addressing accountability of member states to the goals and obligations of the treaty that established the organization. This focus upon affairs deemed communal between the participating member states makes international organizations major actors in global governance, which is "the sum of the

many ways individuals and institutions, public and private, manage their common affairs. It is a continuing process through which conflicting or diverse interests may be accommodated and cooperative action may be taken. It includes formal ... as well as informal arrangements that people and institutions have agreed to or perceive to be in their interest” (Commission on Global Governance 1995, pg. 2, as cited by Karns and Mingst, pgs. 3-4). Where international organizations are concerned said affairs are generally those that are in some way too broad in scope for one state to address on its own, examples including climate change, international smuggling and trafficking, and mutual security. Organizations can be limited by regional area, or by relevance to potential participating states and shared identity, though there can be overlap between the two categories (Karns and Mingst, pgs. 145-153). Regional organizations include the OSCE or the African Union, grouped principally by a common geographical region and the common environmental pressures that result, while relevance-based organizations will typically have a broader scope – such as the United Nations.

Among theories of the direct operation and power dynamics of international organizations, the two are relevant to this analysis. The first is the Principal-Agent (P-A) model, wherein “the principal [states] gives authority to the agent [international organization] to act on its behalf” (Park, Susan, pg. 26). The second is the Constructivist Organizational Culture Approach, which explains that the “[...] power [of international organizations] stems from two sources: the fact that IOs are considered legitimate international actors on the basis of their rational-legal authority as bureaucracies; and their own control over technical expertise and information.” (Park, pg. 28) These two models expose that international organizations rely upon their member states for the power and authority that they need to act, thus leaving them at the mercy of those states should they choose to cut off an international organization’s access to that power, but that

at the same time international organizations can use the legitimacy and control of expertise in their areas in order to require that states provide the organization with the needed power.

Of all international organizations currently active, the United Nations, taking its various branches and sub-organizations within one conceptual umbrella, is arguably the single largest and most comprehensive one in existence. An overwhelming majority of recognized states within the world are members, and branches address matters ranging from global commerce and development to nuclear weaponry to international smuggling. The United Nations hence becomes the broadest overarching international organization in global governance, with a wide spread of mandates that are reflected in the structures of the United Nations itself.

In addition to the performance of global governance the United Nations serves as a place for international actors to meet and form agreements. The organization further serves as an area for carrying out international struggles at the symbolic level, build coalitions and influence between states, and link together related but separated issues of international significance. The United Nations has created itself as a central point for discussion on and development of responses to a wide variety of active issues in the world. “Beginning in the 1970s, the UN began to play an important role on a nexus of interdependence issues by convening global conferences and summits on topics ranging from the environment, food, housing, the law of the sea, disarmament, women, and water to human rights, population and development, and social development. These conferences articulated new international norms; expanded international law; set agendas for governments and the UN itself through programs of action; and promoted linkages among the growing communities of NGOs active on different issues, the UN, and member states’ governments.” (Mingst, Karen A., Margaret P. Karns, and Alynna J. Lyon, pg. 6)

This representatives of states and other organizations to us the UN as a meeting place and

discussion forum on issues that affect more than any one state alone, recasting the United Nations as an enabler of multilateralism.

The concerns of governance held by the states holds an interesting position, as while each state can choose to pursue action on its own the United Nations is ultimately reliant upon the reaching of consensus by member states. It is only with that consensus that the mandates and directives needed by United Nations branches to act are developed and projects are approved. “Coalitions [in the UN] are important because the General Assembly, in particular, functions like a national parliament, each state having one vote and decisions being made by majority [...]. Just as a major political party (or a coalition) can control most decisions, so can a stable coalition composed of a majority of UN member states.” (Mingst, Karns, and Lyon, pg. 83) In this way the consensus of the UN’s member states is what determines the UN’s direction, and contrarily a lack of consensus or opposed consensus can reject the determination of a direction for the organization, with the area this applies to ranging from the issuing of mandates to new branches of the UN to the provision of budgets to those branches. This general observation of dynamic between states and organization mandates can be expanded to other international organizations.

Considering this intersection between the operational freedoms of international organizations and the geopolitical interests of participating states, the importance of considering international organizations in the context of geopolitics becomes clear. By one perspective it can be posited that international organizations are only able to arise through the meeting of the geopolitical interests of multiple states, making international organizations beholden to those geopolitical interests as a factor of their creation and continued existence. Another perspective shows the role of international organizations as a platform and forum for international public diplomatic engagement allowing the member states’ geopolitical interests to be introduced to the

organizations as a factor of the states' engagement with the organizations and other member states, with the effort exerted by the states to pursue their geopolitical interests proceeding to have further effects upon the organization they take place in. Within both conceptualizations exist the people employed by the international organizations directly, striving to fulfill the organizations' mission statements to the best of their abilities even in the face of the states' own efforts if necessary.

Geopolitics and these conceptualizations of the United Nations are not significantly brought together in the existing literature. It is recognized that geopolitics have impacts upon the world that includes the United Nations, but the prospect of geopolitics echoing into the United Nations is not explicitly raised. The article "The Role of the United Nations in Times of Geopolitical Change" is emblematic of the typical closest proximity that the United Nations and geopolitics are brought within. Global geopolitical shifts are recognized as existent, particularly where those shifts represent a perceived growing loss of willingness for participants such as the United States and China in the international order to cooperate with one another ("The Role of the United Nations in Times of Geopolitical Change," para. 2). However this perception of this shift is only brought into the UN as far as the Security Council and "[...] the privileges afforded to the five permanent members [...]" ("The Role of the United Nations," para. 3) while the rest of the United Nations system is left uncriticized. Geopolitical concerns are recognized as something that the United Nations is challenged to face and navigate as an organization free of such concerns, not something that can alter the organization itself.

Martin Duffy is one of the few writers to note the ability of member states pursuing geopolitical interests to affect the United Nations on a broader scope in his article "The United Nations in Crisis: Geo-Political and Geo-Economic Challenges." Much of Duffy's analysis is

primarily interested in breaking down a comparison of the United States' funding of the United Nations and the United States' degree of influence in the organization, holding that there is a disconnect between the two which, even if not taken as a problem of fair treatment, can serve as a basis of conflict between the US and the UN (Duffy, Martin, paras. 4-7). However, he does indicate to other forms of national influence in the United Nations, in particular the question of UN staffing – indicating that several smaller countries, particularly Scandinavian ones, see nationals hold an outsized proportion of UN staff positions within the Secretariat in particular and a correspondingly greater degree of soft power within the system (Duffy, paras. 19-23). In a similar vein China's own growth of influence in the United Nations can be represented by both the growth of China's financial contributions to the United Nations and Chinese nationals securing leadership positions of a greater number of UN branches. Duffy is even able to indicate China's lobbying efforts to secure said positions, pointing towards Cameroon withdrawing its own leadership bid after China cut a debt owed by Cameroon (Duffy, paras. 24-32). From here, however, Duffy's analysis begins to break down as past general gesturing to the natures of power and international cooperation and questioning the United States' and China's aims in those two areas, he struggles to articulate what impact upon UN operations these advancements of influence and geopolitical interests has. What Scandinavian countries do with their soft power in the UN Secretariat is not explored, and how shifting influence alters China and the US' actions in the United Nations is not clear.

Also missing from these analyses is the micro-level aspects of the United Nations and other international organizations. What articles do exist tend to grapple with the place and actions of these organizations as largely homogeneous single units. The role of the United Nations as a whole is examined, but not the people who work within and functionally comprise

the United Nations – and similar for other international organizations. Duffy comes closest to breaking through this conceptual barrier in analyzing the number of UN staff members coming from different states, but his analysis does not move past representing these staff members as merely numbers and quantities. They are not granted characteristics beyond nationality. More significantly, the staff members in question are not shown to have any thoughts of their own as to the subject of geopoliticization that the article discusses, nor is how they engage with, influence, or even cause geopolitical effects in their organization examined – rather, the active actors are the states, who place their nationals in the UN system, and the United Nations itself. As a result, the staff fails to produce any identity beyond that of the United Nations within the article while the article does not engage with this crucial facet of the topic it brings under discussion.

### **Geopolitical theory from the field**

Understanding international organizations as a platform and conduit through which states can engage in international relations allows one to consider international organizations in the context of influencing and being influenced by geopolitical concerns of the member states. As an extension of this understanding, it can be expected that the regular activities of the international organizations will be at least somewhat reactive to the geopolitical interests of those states, as the organizations must adjust to accommodate the associated pressures of those geopolitical interests. In turn, this leaves the individuals working within international organizations seeing their work shift with the overall organization.

The individuals working as parts of international organizations who were interviewed were all consciously aware of the fact that the geopolitical interests of states were able to interfere in the day-to-day operations of their organizations. Further, all were able to express ways of recognizing the appearance of geopolitics in their experiences and methods for engaging

with those geopolitical interests to achieve the goals of their organizations. While some subjects did express that they had not considered certain practices they used in a geopolitical perspective, the general existence of a geopolitical perspective or transformation of their work was not in question to them. The subject from the OSCE stated that “my work is extremely political, everything is politics, everything is geopolitics;” the subject from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime explained that “we are a political organization, we represent all member states and obviously not all member states see things the same way. Our work is to balance here sometimes competing interpretations.”

The methods by which the subjects’ work in their organizations would become geopoliticized were varied in nature. On the most direct level it was noted that when meetings between representatives from different states were held there would be a tendency for those representatives to use the meeting as a platform to make statements on geopolitical issues and crisis areas even when the topics on which those statements were focused were not themselves directly related to the meeting topic. Interview subjects from United Nations branches described a tendency to use formal national statements to place national positions on conflict areas on the official record for meetings in this way as a form of symbolic diplomacy, with other states then using the irrelevance of the statement to the mandate of the international organization hosting the meeting and the meeting’s topic as material to object to those statements being made. This was generally agreed upon as standard practice, with the interview subject from UNIDO saying that they were not involved in the United Nations resolution process in their current position but that based upon their observations of such statements being made on negotiation records “it’s the norm.”

The interview subject from the OSCE described not only experiencing but undertaking a similar route in diplomatic meetings at the direction of the regional European organization's member states, saying that they "no longer discuss issues in their own right." Every issue brought to consideration was perceived and discussed through the perspective of the relevant crisis point, the one they were most experienced with being the war in Ukraine. The example that they gave for the methodology used was regarding the topic of international human trafficking, which they described as ordinarily being able to gather a broad spectrum of international alliance between states against the humanitarian issue. With the outbreak of the war and the beginning of Russia's invasion, their involvement with the topic was instead refocused upon the specific area of Russia's deportation of Ukrainian children from Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine into Russia proper. They explained that now when they engaged with meetings over human trafficking, "I use this format to pass a message that Russia is causing a problem [...] I always come back to the issue that Russia is causing a mass displacement." This refocuses the broad and global human rights issue down to the problems faced by and caused by Ukraine and Russia specifically. Similar methods are applied across other meetings, reshaping entire agendas to focus upon one area of concern out of the global context while Russia issued objections. The subject did not wish to over-emphasize the importance of these meeting statements, however; while they are more visible in changing with geopolitical interests, the subject considered these formal statements to have comparatively little on the diplomatic scene. Similarly, the UNODC interview subject noted that while on-record symbolic statements were widespread they did not significantly impact thematic discussions.

Geopolitical factors also filtered into questions of budgeting for international organizations and their projects and other more subtle influences. The interview subject from the

CTBTO described how there was a trickle-down effect from direct geopolitics to more technical areas, even in areas not affected by the geopolitical crisis or conflict, “because everyone has the conflict in the back of their minds” while working on those details. This has less of an effect upon pre-established long-term funding for special projects. In their words, “[i]f you have an established trust relationship with long-term UN agencies, this is not impacted” but more temporary funding measures experience shifts and changes as the geopolitical environment evolves. The UNIDO interview subject observed similar adjustments in budgetary matters, stating that the United Nations originally operated based off of a singular “core budget” that was approved for relatively longer multi-year periods of time, but that this changed over time due to a combination of various financial crises limiting the funding that states were willing to commit to providing over those extended periods and due to states seeking to obtain further power over the United Nations’ operational processes. The new budgetary processes would be granted over significantly more limited time frames, going from being evaluated and approved on a yearly basis to a monthly one, with the amount of funding being granted also shrinking with states justifying the change through claims of inappropriate use of funds. This in turn makes the matter of the budget a priority, as conducting operations without that funding is not possible.

The UNIDO subject also noted the knock-on effects of domestic political shifts in member states to the provision of budget, holding up recent elections in the United States as an example. Especially with the polarization of the United States’ political sphere at present, every election has the potential of seeing dramatic shifts in the state’s political aims and foreign policy agendas, thus calling into question whether that state will continue to provide funding commitments – as now-former president Donald Trump did during his presidency, along with other acts attempting to eliminate the United States’ ties to the UN (Mingst, Karns, and Lyon, pg.

9). Especially in the case of such wealthy countries as the United States, this produces a general atmosphere of uncertainty; as the interview subject said, “what do we do [if they stop giving us funding], do we just stop the work?” The subject attributed this as a general consequence of states wanting to take national power back from the United Nations, with the result that funding for the United Nations and its projects and geopolitical considerations had become completely intertwined even though they “should not be effected.”

Multiple subjects expressed a perspective that the nature of the geopolitical challenges that they faced in their work had shifted over time. This change was generally not expressed in the terms of a straightforward increase in quantity. Instead, three of the subjects indicated specific manners of change that they had seen over the last few years. The fourth subject, from the UNODC, focused on the broader geopolitical perspective of their work in the United Nations and so did not express any form of significant change, instead expressing that there was constantly some political issue somewhere in the world that needed to be properly managed and addressed. Instead they indicated that geopolitical issues simply shifted in a wave-like pattern, and that “the pendulum keeps swinging.” While some issues have become more difficult to negotiate, in their perspective, this was only a change in what was difficult – the overall level of polarization was not seen as significantly different to before.

The interview subject who worked in the CTBTO indicated that the primary change to the entry of geopolitical concerns was that they had seen was not frequency but an increase in the difficulty by which those concerns could be addressed. They described the parties and interests that they worked to reconcile as having grown increasingly further apart. This in turn means that reconciling those interests was yet harder to do – not impossible, but requiring more time to be taken in negotiations than was typical in prior “normal times.” They further clarified that these

were normal as seen primarily from western states. The subject suggested that these increasing pressures and divergences were a result of a shift out of “peacetime,” with the effects of such being aggravated in a holistic fashion by further crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the growing energy crisis, and the effects of supply chain disruption, with all of these increasing the pressure of an already tense international environment. This holistic perspective was echoed by the interview subject from the UNIDO, saying “We are living more and more in a globalized world and that has many benefits, but also certain downs [sic],” as well as taking a longer perspective on the time frame over which the changes had occurred – especially in regard to the geopolitical interference with funding for UN projects – in noting that “things have changed over the last century [...] the current work is a different work.” They additionally pointed to actions in non-crisis areas that aided in spreading geopolitical interests around the globe in a way that caused them to feature in their organization’s work, such as China’s investment efforts in Africa.

The idea of there being a departure from a peacetime international relations environment was also built upon by the other two interview subjects who described a change in the geopolitical issues they found in their work over time, particularly regarding the war in Ukraine. The UNIDO subject from the United Nations named the war and the associated food and energy crises as specific examples of events with a holistic broader impact upon global tensions. They felt that the war has made the strain upon the budgetary systems of the United Nations as described above particularly acute in their expertise area of international development work. The loss of funding necessitated that greater monetary input be solicited from the private sector, a change which the subject described as the “first time a price tag has been attached to the Sustainable Development Goals” which was contrasted with the outbreak of the COVID pandemic not necessitating such an adjustment.

The interview subject from the OSCE took the importance of the war a step further in stating that “Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has been a watershed [...] even issues that have been somewhat guarded, such as climate change, even that is now geopolitical.” This was the only time one of the interview subjects identified an increase of geopolitical involvement in their work. This change was specifically centered around the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War, which she pointed to as a major turning point in how she approached her work and was expected to approach her work. With the outbreak of the war their role in diplomatic efforts has become more openly confrontational, at least where Russia is concerned. The OSCE subject further described that the war had come to fully encompass all aspects of their work, ranging from human rights to the environment.

#### *Managing geopolitical interests*

Three of the interview subjects agreed that being able to manage geopolitical concerns was an important part of their work. All three made very strong statements to the effect that the question of geopolitical concerns was a primary one; stating that the question of geopolitics was part and parcel with their work or the entirety of their work, the subject from the UNODC expressing the latter view stating that “I think that’s one of the reasons why we [the United Nations] exist, to have a body that serves all countries but also performs that [consensus-building] role.” The OSCE subject noted the ability to manage and present geopolitical concerns as a critical skill set, stating straightforwardly “[t]hat is what is expected from me.” The remaining interview subject from UNIDO was more circumspect, noting that they were not directly involved in negotiation efforts and that they perceived their skill set as “not managing the geopolitical aspect per se but to ensure you do not put the organization in an uncomfortable situation.”

While the ability to manage geopolitical concerns was generally agreed upon as important in some form, the methods used to do so differed between interview subjects. The UNODC interview subject worked through a highly collaborative process with the countries that they sought to support with their project proposals and the countries that would fund those projects, which the subject identified as “co-developing.” This highly collaborative process would cut down the risk of a geopolitical objection causing a project to fail, as any such objection would be identified and the project either adjusted or halted long before it could reach the proposal stage. The subject also noted a reliance on the diplomatic community’s maintenance of a political decorum, with a general agreement among participants that “we want to reach consensus on something.” This reflects an overall emphasis on consensus-building, with the subject expressing the conceptualization that aside from the directives of the United Nations sub-organizations’ and branches’ mandates indicating a general area and direction of action the United Nations was reliant upon the development and transmission of a consensus from the member states for the UN to act upon, giving a question-and-response example of “‘What’s the UN’s stance on marijuana legalization?’ We don’t have a stance, what’s your stance?”

Following a similar approach, the UNIDO interview subject expressed that the preferred approach to geopoliticization was to avoid situations in which one would need to push back against the geopolitical and instead work around such areas. The subject expressed pessimism over their ability to directly counter geopolitically motivated actions and obstructions, saying “I wish I had the ability, I had the capacity and power to push back,” hence the emphasis on avoiding circumstances where attempting to push back becomes necessary. This might result in having to take longer or less straightforward routes to reach the intended goal of a project, or even see the project diverted from those that the project developer knows are more in need, but

the subject emphasized that one must “[a]lways try to avoid the situation of blockage.” This is paired with an emphasis on maintaining openness and avenues for discussion; “you need to try to continue and open a dialogue, that’s diplomacy. And now you see a retreat from diplomacy, it’s word against word. And that’s not really helpful.” The UNIDO subject also indicated that there was a drive to return to the “core budget” method of funding, to limit the member states’ ability to alter the functions of their organization on geopolitical grounds.

The other two interview subjects described a more proactive approach to meeting geopolitical interests. The language with which diplomacy engaged in was noted by both as one notable technique, with the use of the other party’s native language helping to build a sense of trust and familiarity. The subject from the CTBTO in particular emphasized the value of utilizing diversity within the organization, explaining “imagine you make a presentation to a group of member states that you are receiving funding with [sic], and you show the collaboration between six people from six different continents, and you also use multiculturalism so when a country [representative] from Latin America asks a question you can pull someone who speaks Spanish,” with the use of the representative’s native language building trust and the impression that “you are home.” The OSCE subject also noted that with the OSCE having 27 member states within the organization, there is room to maneuver between the opinions of different member states to exert influence over the diplomatic process and the context in which decisions are made.

The interview subjects generally were of the opinion that other individual actors in the international area worked to remain conscious of the geopolitical in their own approaches. This assessment included those who worked for other international organizations as well as state governments. Other parties in the international system were expected by the interview subjects to take similar approaches to managing the geopolitical factors of the international world as the

subjects themselves used, with the UNODC interview subject who advocated for a co-developmental approach, in particular saying they expected other parties used similar methods. The UNIDO subject expressed the management of the geopolitical as a fundamental necessity, such that not taking the question into account would simply be a waste of time for all involved. Without at least a base level of engagement between states to work around geopolitical hard lines and hear the concerns of the other party as a part of a two-way dialogue nothing could happen. “When they [the states] meet is where you can do something.” The OSCE subject similarly expressed the belief that those who design international projects must always be aware of the potential pitfalls imposed by geopolitical constraints, with the design needing to consider the geopolitical environment, what countries are involved, who the larger donors to the project would be, and whether those who would be approached for funding for the project would be willing to offer support.

### *Legitimacy of action*

One subject that quickly rose to prominence in the interviews was the subject of legitimacy. The building of legitimacy for projects to be initiated by the international organization was broadly seen as a way to overcome geopolitically-motivated objections to those projects. A more legitimate project is one that will not only be more able to defy attempts to obstruct its performance due to the weight put behind the project, but also one that will face fewer objections to begin with. As such, all interview subjects agreed that they sought to ensure that their projects and proposals would be viewed as legitimate. However, each interview subject expressed a different conception of what would provide a project with legitimacy.

The basic mandate of the organization served as one significant source of legitimacy. The mandate of the organization serves as a basic definition of what the organization is intended to

address on the international stage; as such, actions taken by the organization that fall within the organization's mandate bear an inherent degree of legitimacy. The mandate can also be used to delegitimize geopolitical interference based on crises and conflicts that fall outside the organization's mandate. As the CTBTO interview subject put it, "if you are drilling water wells in Kazakhstan, what does that have to do with the conflict in Ukraine?" The process of this being described by this subject as going to an objecting state and saying, "here is the mandate you agreed to, please let us move forward with it, please let us do our work." For the UNODC interview subjects the inherent legitimacy was sufficient for their purposes and no further efforts to intentionally grow legitimacy were necessary. When projects that incorporated areas outside the mandate of one organization were developed, it would then be appropriate to seek collaboration with other organizations whose mandates did cover the additional areas so as to ensure that the project would fall under the heading of the collected mandates of the organizations. For example, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime holds a general mandate of international drug crime, but when developing a project addressing the smuggling of drugs through the international postal service it would be best to reach out to the Universal Postal Union.

The CTBTO interview subject also proposed that legitimacy could be built up through collaboration with and approval of multiple organizations. Through having more parties involved with the project, the project obtains a form of social momentum that makes it harder to object to or halt effectively. Examples of approval included drawing upon the OECD's list of states eligible for development assistance to promote development projects in those areas or turning to the representatives of Western member states to make cases for funding to domestic ministries of finance and ministries of foreign relations more effectively than a United Nations branch could

do directly. The subject also mentioned that there has been an effort since the mid-2010s to reach out to non-traditional donors for funding and support ranging from corporations such as Google and META to specific high-value individuals. Efforts to appeal to such corporations and individuals were also discussed by the UNIDO interview subject from the United Nations, although they pointed out the flaws with the strategy. In particular, donors from the private sector were described as being less willing to take necessary risks in providing funding for development projects; the inherent profit motive of private sector actors means that UN work in areas that might not be particularly profitable even after development are not seen as appealing. Meanwhile private sector actors try to use the projects that they do provide funding for as a “Trojan horse” to gain access to new markets, with the spreading of the company’s brand and products being given precedence over providing aid. In turn, individual philanthropy is often highly focused on specific issues or locations.

The OSCE interview subject expressed the maintenance of legitimacy as “need[ing] to consult the stakeholders.” This process resembles the concept of “co-developing” mentioned earlier, involving reaching out to the people being addressed by projects and organization actions, to ambassadors from various states and agencies, and to subject matter experts in order to generate a proposal that meets the needs of all parties involved. The interview subject did note that there is a balancing act between pursuing their own perspective and goals and reconciling the aims of the other parties, saying “I have my own agenda. I need to convince them, but it’s loaded.” They also pointed to the subjectivity of legitimacy as a factor they took into account, noting that when choosing other parties to involve in the process in order to build up legitimacy for their projects they chose based upon their ability to secure the cooperation of the other party – representatives from a state that is a candidate for membership in the European Union being

more willing to cooperate with and integrate themselves with a Europe-based organization – and the context of what they are seeking legitimacy for – focusing on collaborating with experts from the Balkans when developing a project involving the Balkans in order to further reach out to that area and legitimize activity there, for example.

The UNIDO interview subject put the primary source of legitimacy for their projects down on the engagement of the state and society that receives the project’s attentions. “You’re not going to bring a project into a country unless it is somehow his own.” The subject further elaborated that their preferred source of legitimacy for projects that they were involved in was found in engaging with the local civil society of the area that the project was operating within so as to get the local civil society to take ownership over the project. The subject expressed that these local civil societies in areas receiving developmental aid were proving ready to organize themselves in the subject’s experience, with the result that collaboration with local parties helped produce much better organization of projects than otherwise. Additionally, partnering with local civil societies allows for problems with the projects to be pointed out that would otherwise be overlooked, with the UNIDO interview subject noting as an example that it was local civil societies who drew attention to the statistics of private sector actors engaging in and facilitating the illicit flow of goods into developing areas. The interview subject did portray this dynamic as a somewhat recent phenomenon, saying that while member states and local communities were now more willing to express opinions on the developmental aid that they were being given this has not always been the case, and even still larger and more powerful states could still be expected to be more straightforward with their motivations and wants than others. It was also noted that earlier efforts to collaborate with local non-governmental organizations struggled due to NGOs in these areas having to sustain themselves through merchandising or other revenue

streams, blurring the line between an NGO that sought to improve the local situation and a local small business. Regardless, as of the present the interview subject strongly advocated working together with not only governments but the local communities that projects sought to assist in order to boost the project's legitimacy and effectiveness, saying "I found them very well organized."

These perspectives on what provides an international organization's projects with legitimacy are not mutually exclusive. It is wholly possible for a project to derive legitimacy from the basic mandate of the organization hosting the project proposal, from developing a collaborative effort involving a greater number of contributors, from ensuring alignment with the interests of the states one seeks the approval of from the outset, and from encouraging local civil society to take ownership of the project themselves, all at the same time. The differing perspectives of the interview subjects here likely reflects the different areas of relevance and methods of operation used by the different organizations and branches that the interview subjects worked within. It is also possible that the different projects that these organizations sought to undertake and the different international problems that they sought to redress means that one of these sources of legitimacy would be either more easily acquired or more effective in application than the others for that particular organization, thus producing a specialization within each organization for seeking and utilizing the preferred source of legitimacy for that organization.

### **Employment in Geopolitics**

Beyond the influence of geopolitics upon international organizations as a whole and how this impacts the organizations' functions on a structural level, these geopolitical factors also exert an influence over the individuals working within the international organizations. Each individual working within these organizations practices international relations in the most direct fashion

possible as a factor of their everyday employment. Their individual perspectives of these areas not only reflect the status of the field but is in turn cycled back into it as they bring their attitudes toward their work into the next workday.

Multiple interview subjects discussed how they derived the importance of their work not upon any government-level impacts of their work, but rather the impact that their activities have for individuals. As the UNODC interview subject described, they did not see the most important effects of their work as being the creation or acceptance of resolutions in themselves, but rather “it’s about the single mom who needs help for herself and for her kids, about the farmer who lost his leg from stepping on a landmine,” as well as indicating that they were “in this job in the first place [...] to help service those who are in need.” This emphasis on benefitting people within states can also be seen in the UNIDO interview subject’s focus upon ensuring that their projects would be received by and helpful to the people on the level of the local community. While the subject did concede that there were cases in which it would be necessary to redirect projects away from groups and areas that the project developer knew needed the benefits of the project more than those that the project would be redirected to, this concession existed in the context of ensuring that the project proceeded at all. The subject also expressed notable frustration with the private sector exploiting aid projects for the purpose of generating profits.

While the OSCE subject did not speak on their work in terms of impact to individuals, they did indicate a preference for actions and activities that constructed general positive impacts over conflictual or insubstantial activities. The subject indicated a dislike or apathy toward their recent work regarding Russia, saying “ I know that my statements [against Russia] will not change anything, but that’s what is required [...] but the things I truly enjoy are other things,” giving examples of those other things as selling project ideas to Brussels, informal consultations

to give their perspective to groups that were looking to engage with the EU, and similar constructive collaborative projects. The subject proceeded to draw a particular contrast in attitude toward their engagement with Ukraine and Russia in saying “for Ukraine itself I also have some positive stories, on Russia I have nothing.” This was specifically indicated to be a result of the limited ability for their actions to have an impact in Russia, with little ability to reach potential collaborators in the country itself – particularly in ways that would not just make those collaborators targets of the Russian government, with the option of providing funds to such persons or groups in particular being noted as carrying risks due to requirements that those within Russia who accept such funds declare themselves as foreign agents. Meanwhile those collaborators who are outside Russia, due to having fled or otherwise being located abroad, themselves have limited ability to cause change in Russia itself, meaning discussions along those lines become abstract theoretical discussions. Contrarily, when engaging with Ukraine the OSCE interview subject is able to take part in projects ranging from large-scale de-mining efforts to environmental impacts to accountability training for Ukrainian prosecutors, NGOs, and other relevant parties.

#### *Geopolitics as interference or foundation*

A point of contention across the interviews proved to be the perspective with which the entry of the geopolitical was viewed by the interview subjects. While the subjects all said that their work was to some degree fundamentally geopolitical, there was division as to what degree geopolitical interests were an intruding factor in their work or an omnipresent foundation of their work. This difference in perspective could be further seen in the attitude taken toward the appearance of factors that were explicitly identified as geopolitical in nature. Those who viewed geopolitics and their work in international organizations as one and the same tended to be more

accepting regarding having to work around obstructions in their work caused by geopolitical interests, while those who saw their work as being interfered in by the geopolitical were more willing to express frustration with its appearance.

The interview subject from the UNODC and the subject from the OSCE firmly placed geopolitics as a core part of the makeup of their work. The UNODC subject described the United Nations as “a political organization” from the outset, further stating that “[t]he UN was created because of a geopolitical situation” and that geopolitical concerns were a core part of their work. When asked about how they felt over seeing the projects they had seen fail or be modified due to geopolitical factors they said “I feel okay about it, it can be beneficial in certain circumstances,” seeing the changes as a process by which assistance could be provided to people and areas not previously identified as needing aid. The subject placed the central importance of their work upon finding the balancing point in geopolitics where agreements could be negotiated. In a similar vein the OSCE subject described their work as “extremely political, everything is politics, everything is geopolitics.” They described experiencing a greater degree of frustration when they saw projects fail, especially when the failure was due to the war between Russia and Ukraine, lamenting that “what happened now basically erased everything” and that “the space in which we can still find these pockets of creativity are reduced to a bare, bare minimum now.” At the same time the subject expressed acceptance of the situation, saying “I recognize that we live in an imperfect world.”

The interview subject from the CTBTO also said that the geopolitical was part and parcel of their work, but took a more adversarial perspective to engaging with it and separated it out from their work enough to identify geopolitical concerns as something which made their work more difficult instead of being their work. In addition to speaking on the various ways in which

geopolitics could obstruct projects and make negotiations more difficult, they noted geopolitics causing projects that they had supported to fail as “heartbreaking.” The UNIDO interview subject identified geopolitical concerns as something that, while already present in their work, was separately identifiable enough part of the totality of their work as to have experienced a distinct increase in scope. This in turn produced an identifying of and frustration with geopolitical concerns interfering with the work, with the subject saying, “Of course I do find it frustrating, because you see issues that are not related to politics hijacked and then they become political.”

#### *Interplay of frustration and satisfaction*

As geopolitical interests in the context of international organizations can be seen as a limiting factor on what those organizations can even attempt to do, it would be a natural expectation that those who encounter the geopolitical in their work would experience frustration. Indeed, several interview subjects discussed how they had seen projects that they were involved in be impacted by geopolitical factors. The reactions to these interferences was generally negative. The interview subject from the CTBTO explained that while they had not had a project fail while they were directly involved in it they had seen a special monitoring mission to Ukraine that they had been involved in putting together while in a position with a different international organization be shuttered due to the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war. They described that closure as having a strong emotional impact, saying “It breaks your heart. Not because what you have worked for has disappeared, but because we exist to mediate peace, to provide communities and humanity a peaceful life [...] and that’s [the end of the peace] heartbreaking.” Other interview subjects also expressed feelings of frustration with geopolitical factors affecting their work. The interview subject from UNIDO expressed that, “Of course I do find it frustrating,

because you see issues that are not related to politics hijacked and then they become political.”

The interview subject from the OSCE noted that certain aspects of their work, particularly regarding Russia in the current time, were if not frustrating then at least unsatisfying compared to their work in other areas.

While acknowledgement of frustration was common among interview subjects, this was also seemingly contradicted by the interview subjects with expressions of general fascination and creativity with the geopolitics of the subjects’ work. When asked how they felt about the geopoliticization in their work, the interview subject from the UNODC said, “I love it. It gives you new challenges, it helps you keep sight of why you’re in this job in the first place, which is to help service those who are in need, and it helps you to keep focus on why it is so important to have those agreements or consensus, because someone somewhere desperately needs that agreement to happen so that their life could be a little bit better.” The UNODC subject also offered the strongest rejection of geopolitics causing frustration with working in an international organization, suggesting a belief that while others might reasonably experience frustration such a feeling would be an indication that working within an international organization would not necessarily be the best-fitting position for those others. In expressing their own feelings of frustration, the other interview subjects immediately occupy less radical positions on the whether the feeling of frustration is one that people working in international organizations are warranted in feeling, but these subjects also expressed more positive views on geopolitics to accompany their experiences of frustration when asked the same question. The interview subject from the CTBTO stated that the geopolitical aspects of their work made their job very interesting and provided new challenges, adding that when a proposed project succeeded “you celebrate all the more because you have achieved success in such an environment.” The interview subject from

UNIDO also contextualized their reported frustration with the addition that “On the other hand this is why I decided to do this kind of work instead of other work. [...] You want to play your part in the puzzle.” Not only is a negative reaction to the presence of geopolitical factors not a universally-reported experience, but even where negative reactions are reported the geopolitical is still embraced by those interviewed.

The interview subject from the OSCE, in their own explanation of their feelings regarding the presence of geopolitical concerns and interference in their work, provided a framework that could explain the existence of the observed dichotomy. They overall reported that, “it’s a fascinating job, because you can be really creative.” However, this fascination existed in the same space as areas where the subject was much more ambivalent about their engagement and excitement over their work, particularly in the context of Russia. Further exploration of this divide proved fruitful through the subject’s contrasting their work with and in Ukraine and their work with Russia, with them saying, “for Ukraine itself I have some positive stories, on Russia I have nothing.” The interview subject explained that there were many projects that they were involved with regarding Ukraine where they felt positive differences for people could be achieved, reducing threat to civilians through de-mining efforts or fighting corruption through training on accountability. With Russia, the subject’s ability to engage in any projects with a positive impact for the peoples living in Russia had been severely curtailed and her engagement was largely limited to maintaining focus on the objections to Russia’s invasion with public statements and confrontations. The subject agreed upon further discussion that the difference in their attitude between these cases was their ability to work with the geopolitical influences that were involved in their work. Where those geopolitical concerns and forces could be engaged with in order to create a positive impact or meaningful change, such work was

satisfying for the interview subject; where the geopolitical factors formed a wall that prevented meaningful or beneficial action from being taken, the geopolitical became a source of frustration.

While the other interview subjects did not themselves directly express this dynamic, their frustration was sourced in contexts where geopolitical factors halted or obstructed their work. The CTBTO explicitly linking their sense of heartbreak to a project being shut down. The UNIDO subject followed expressing their frustration with issues seen as non-political being “hijacked” and becoming political by discussing both their feelings of helplessness to push back against geopolitical factors and the need to avoid diplomacy and dialogue from being blocked so as to be able to proceed with implementing projects. In both cases the interview subjects’ frustrations with the geopolitical can be tied to situations in which they cannot act or cease to be able to act in the face of the geopolitical. Even the UNODC subject provides an indication of this link between inability to act and frustration. While the UNODC subject denied any feeling of frustration arising from the geopolitical in their work, they were also the only interview subject who indicated that they had not had any projects or proposals that they had been involved with fail outright, only be modified before implementation. The only subject who denied feeling frustration over geopoliticization of their work was also the only one who did not indicate that they had ever been rendered wholly unable to act due to geopolitical factors.

## **Conclusion**

Theories of geopolitics have only been introduced to the context of international organizations comparatively recently, with much of the history of geopolitical theory tending to disregard international organizations as distinct actors in the field. As such it is common for those articles that do bring together geopolitical theory and international organizations to suggest that the meeting of the two is something new outside of academia as well. Not only that, but the

introduction of geopolitics is further characterized as a challenge and threat for international organizations. Geopolitics takes on an oppositional form to international organizations like the United Nations, threatening these organizations' place in the international order and requiring that international organizations either adapt to a new paradigm or face the possibility of elimination.

Contrary to the narrative of geopolitical interests conflicting with the existence of international organizations, the interviews with those who work within and as parts of international organizations instead suggest an environment that is fully aware of and adjusted to geopolitics. The interview subjects were all cognizant of the geopolitical and how that could factor into their work. The subjects also did not refer to geopolitics as new or unexpected aspects of their work, but rather as a long-term presence that they were already well aware of. The UNODC interview subject even introduced the concept of the United Nations as being derived from geopolitical interests and a geopolitical crisis point, a perspective that is not pervasive in current theory regarding geopolitics, the United Nations, or international organizations. This historical framework has the potential to drastically shift the nature of how the United Nations and other international organizations can engage with geopolitical concerns, as rather than a new development that these organizations must scramble to react and adapt to the organizations are from the outset engaged in geopolitical processes as under-recognized but aware actors.

Backing up this shift in perspective on the geopolitical awareness and ability of international organizations was how all interview subjects were able to produce and discuss methodologies by which they could seek to manage and address competing geopolitical interests of their organizations' member states when asked. These methods were diverse and did not directly reference each other, indicating that they were organic developments by the interview

subjects and those that they worked with rather than being derived from a common official playbook or similar repository. Even the relatively common method for pushing projects past geopolitical objections that was legitimacy varied in nature, with the interview subjects indicating different sources of legitimacy for their work. However, the methods were introduced as techniques that had been developed and tested over the course of at least the interview subjects' careers, rather than new innovations being introduced to manage a new environment. This indicates that geopolitical questions are not new or radical to the interview subjects, but a factor that has long been accounted for even if it has not been officially and separately recognized at higher organizational levels. Continued exploration of this concept in theory crafting and research of international organizations should be pursued with consideration to expanding the scope of geopolitical theory's application to international organizations and recognition of international organizations as active geopolitical actors in their own right. The methods through which those employed in international organizations also deserve deeper and broader exploration, as an extension of the agency of international organizations, an exploration of international organizations as an area for public and private diplomacy between international actors, and as a contribution to theory in the meeting of competing geopolitical interests without producing open conflict between involved parties.

The variance in where the interview subjects sought legitimacy for their projects also may suggest that the methods that were deemed appropriate for use in resisting or maneuvering past roadblocks introduced by geopolitics varied based on the nature and objectives of the organization in question. For instance, it may be noted that the UNIDO interview subject, whose work involves attempting to improve the development level of impoverished or suffering areas around the world, was the one who sought legitimacy through engagement with local actors and

encouraging those already residing in the area to take ownership of the projects being introduced. Meanwhile the subject from the UNODC who focused on transmitting information on international drug crime to states and state-run agencies relied on the mandate granted to their organization by the states for legitimacy, and the CTBTO interview subject whose organization still is working to bring state actors onboard with the signing of the treaty banning nuclear weapons testing turned to collaboration with other actors on the international stage for project legitimization. Further research is needed to determine whether this apparent distinction of methods based upon organizational goals is true and whether a categorization of international organizations based upon the organizations' objectives would be useful for researchers and theorists.

The interviews also highlight the personal and everyday perspectives of those who work as part of international organizations and accordingly engage in international relations and geopolitics as a function of their regular employment. These individuals serve as the micro-level actors putting agendas into action within their organizations, and they are thus far little recognized in the existing literature. The inclusion of their perspectives adds depth to the understanding of international organizations and provides insight to motivations that can shape the direction of the organizations as a whole. In particular, the available evidence indicates that a drive to seek avenues of action that provide benefit to people on an everyday level can be found amongst many who pursue careers in international organizations. This motivation appears to hold true regardless of the subjects' position or specific organization. If further research finds this individual motivation to be as widespread as the available sample indicates, then this can provide a mechanism by which a preference for international organizations as a whole to pursue humanitarian aims can be determined and expressed. The interviews also show the subjects

expressing frustration with areas where their efforts are brought to a halt by geopolitical factors, indicating the possibility of an organizational preference to seek avenues of action at reduced levels or in alternative directions rather than accept inactivity. Further investigation into these possible behavioral tendencies of international organizations and the individuals who make up those organizations would be a fruitful area of research.

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