



The cascading dynamics of informal institutions: organizational processes and governance implications

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Abstract

This special issue aims to offer empirical, qualitative and comparative insights into the waves of informality sweeping the globe and to decipher the nature and consequence of the proliferating dynamics of informal organizations. From a policy perspective, the special issue is motivated to delve into the operationalization of practices and outcomes of informal organizations. In particular, the articles encompassing this special issue focus on three sets of issues that together compose the main analytical framework of this project: (1) Proposing an innovative analytical framework for the study of informal organizations by putting the cascading effect at the core of its narrative; (2) Offering comparative insights into the contesting and converging components in the wave of informal organizations and their effects on global governance; and (3) Enabling projections on how informal organizations interact and rub up against each other both cooperatively and in a contested fashion.

Keywords Informality · Informal governance · Informal international organizations · Informal institutionalization · Cascading effects · Informal networking · IOs

When the post-1945 institutional architecture was created, it was based on the formal foundation of a number of hub organizations located at the global level (Ikenberry 2001). With an emphasis on charters or other forms of constitutionalism, established rules and modes of operation, and open access to sovereign entities, the United Nations (UN) and the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) provided the dominant organizational model imbued with considerable legitimacy (Hurd 1999; Zurn 2018). The aspiration—and indeed the expectation—was a universal projection of this organizational model.

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The privileging of formal international organizations (IOs) in terms of operational practice meshed with International Relations (IR) theory. Not just liberal internationalists such as Ikenberry but other forms of scholarship that emphasized the importance of institutions privileged formal organizations. Early work of this nature, however, focused institutional choice in a very limited fashion: most commonly constricting the choice between formal IOs and unilateralism by powerful countries, notably the United States (US). As the best-known article of this type argues: ‘Rational states will use or create a formal IO when the value of these functions outweighs the costs, notably the resulting limits on unilateral action’ (Abbott and Snidal 1998: 5).

Such an approach, even as it initially appeared, was faulty. In institutional terms, from the mid-1970s, the dominant operational challenge to formal multilateral IOs came not from unilateralism but from the model of informal institutionalism around the G7. In the imagery we utilize in this article—the Cascading Dynamics of Informal Institutions—the G7 serves as the original source of a model that extended appreciably in the decades to come (Putnam and Bayne 1987).

In large part, the challenge of informal institutions as exhibited by the ascendancy of the G7 was rational, as in the context of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, as for that matter was the elevation of the G20. With accumulated pressures, the established formal IO model had become intensely contested (Hale et al. 2013; see also Dingwerth 2021). Under increased tests of balancing efficiency and representation, it was the weaknesses—not the strengths—that came to the fore. The formal organizations were deemed by critics to be slow to adapt instrumentally in terms of functional areas, and, just as seriously, in their ability to provide equity between incumbents and the ‘rest’ (Zakaria 2008; Zarakol 2019).

In operational terms, the choice of informal rather than formal institutions relates to the accentuated weight of efficiency. That is to say, shifts toward informality in the form of the G7 took place amid the oil and commodity shocks of the 1970s (Putnam and Bayne 1988, Bergsten and Henning 1996; Dobson 2007), and the creation of the finance Group of 20 (G20) as a reaction to the Asian/IMF crisis of the 1990s.

Yet, if a model for the extension of informal institutionalism from the core industrialized countries to the Global South, the G7 was also *sui generis*. In terms of modalities, the model of the G7 was highly important. Indeed, many features of the G7 were incorporated into other institutional designs. Whereas formal IOs possessed constitutions or charters, a physical site, organizational charts, and regular meeting times, informal institutions possessed none of these.

At the same time, the G7 possessed several distinctive features. In terms of what can be termed ‘club’ dynamics, the G7 stands out in terms of its relative cohesiveness. The G7 could have serious inner tensions (as on the 2003 US invasion of Iraq), but there was a club culture of hanging together that was solidified by a wider number of political and social affinities.¹ Equally, the image of rationality was weakened

¹ Club-iness or the club-like model of diplomacy prizes exclusivity but it also can privilege members’ emphasis on areas of converging interests and, in turn, their attempts to downplay points of tension and disagreement. For more on clubbiness see (Heine 2013).



by the prominent role of ideology the G7 promoted. This was illustrated most prominently by the turn toward neo-liberalism and structural adjustment in the 1980s.

If, therefore, the G7 served as the source of the subsequent cascade of informal institutions, the route is not straightforward. The motivations for what we term a cascade were different, as was the relationship to the question of membership. Whereas the G7 model privileged smallness in terms of countries let into the club, the model was far more diverse with respect to the Global South. At one end of the spectrum, as in the G20, they were integrated with an array of other—unlike-minded—countries. But, at the other end of the spectrum, whether in the grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS), or Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia (MIKTA), or the Indo-Pacific initiatives, there was also some degree of unlike-mindedness.

Moving beyond a single source of informal institutionalization

In terms of this special issue's overarching theme, we view the expansion of informal institutions beyond the original source of the G7 as nothing less than a 'cascading' dynamic, one that implies an outward emanation from the original trickle to a torrent. That is, the core institutional features of the informal 'Gs' spreading beyond the original source of the G7. The G20, most notably, stimulated the creation of the grouping of the BRICS, in 2006 (Cooper 2016; Kahler 2013; Rewizorski 2015; Stuenkel 2020), and then the MIKTA in 2013 (Cooper 2015). Political, economic, and security forums or groupings such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) have also spread appreciably, often outgrowing their original membership and arguably increasing the projection of their international clout and visibility. The original SCO, for instance, counted China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan as members in 1996. It now counts India and Pakistan as members with Mongolia, Afghanistan, Iran, and Belarus observers. These emanations in the Global South and less-developed world provide another rationale for the special issue: They seem to exhibit their own separate dynamics that scholars have yet to fully unpack.

Informal institutions of the integrative type, with association between G7 members and non-G7 members—borrow heavily from the G7 model. In terms of motivations, the catalyst again is efficiency in terms of crisis management (Cooper 2010; Cooper and Thakur 2013; Kirton 2013; Luckhurst 2016; Naylor 2019; Slaughter 2019). And the modalities possess some striking parallels as in the use of Sherpas and 'outreach' groups.

The dynamics become more distinctive when attention is shifted to informal institutions with a membership exclusively or predominately from the Global South. In terms of motivations, the assumptions of rationalist institutionalists (based on universalist calculations on material self-interest) fail to grasp the complexity of institutional designs. The older illustration of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) at the regional level—typically displaying club dynamics, with a consensus-oriented culture and self-selected membership (Cooper and Stubbs



2017)—demonstrates this inadequacy. As a book focusing on Asian informal institutional argues: [the] rationalist approach leaves unanswered the more fundamental question about how interests, whether for purposes of strategic manipulation...or for positioning preferences in the design of institutions (Pekkanen 2016: 80).

With this deficiency in mind, it is not surprising that the motivations of ASEAN have been positioned through a constructivist lens. From this perspective, institutional thickening takes place with the development, spread and adoption of ideas, especially norms, which give institutions increased coherence and identity (Acharya 1997; Khong and Nesadurai 2007). Indeed, the basis for ASEAN can be traced back to a series of international meetings around Asia in the decade after the end of the Second World War and which culminated in the Bandung Conference of 1955. The Bandung Conference discussions were relatively informal, unstructured, and discrete, and sought out pragmatic solutions that all participants could live with. This approach was adopted in ASEAN—and is often called ‘the ASEAN Way’—and was picked up by the ASEAN Plus Three or APT grouping (Acharya 1997).² The norms that were adopted by the APT of a commitment to sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference in the affairs of others similarly echo the ideas which prevailed at Bandung. Moreover, with regard to decision making the prevailing norms amongst the ASEAN and APT members are that consultations and discussions should take place before a decision is made on the basis of consensus. Here, both similarities and differences to the G7 model jump out. Informal institutions generally feature recurrent meetings among members but are not legalized through a treaty and typically have no permanent secretariat. Significantly, in line with their loose operational style there is little or no attempt—unlike with the UN and IFIs—to negotiate or impose binding rules or codes of conduct on members. Instead, club dynamics commonly prevail, allowing for a divergence of views and interests between members rather than the more disciplined joint positions generally required by many formal organizations. That members are able to do so is a product of both exclusivity—the club has bounded membership that is unlikely to expand unless all agree—and networking, a situation where members maintain an extensive set of partners and obligations outside the informal organization but meet within the ‘club’ to address important, shared interest areas (Heine 2013: 63).

Divergence stands out, however, amid some considerable institutional similarities between older and newer designs. In terms of means, the older design associated with ASEAN gradually acquired the characteristics of ‘nest formality’ within an informal setting (Acharya 1998; Hidetaka 2005; see also Pekkanen 2016). In other words, features including intergovernmental programs, working groups, task forces, and expert networks were built in. In addition, the motivations of informal institutions with a membership beyond the G7 often extend either implicitly or explicitly into the security domain. This is completely different from the financial/economic crisis committees of the G7 and the G20, which have struggled to transform in steering committees with a security dimensions.

² The APT consist of ten ASEAN Member States and the People’s Republic of China, Japan and the Republic of Korea.



This security dimension has received greater attention in the origins of the BRICS. This is largely on account of Russia, its military might, and its security stance. With this context in mind, Moscow's privileging of the 'Primakov Doctrine,' named after Yevgeny Primakov, Russia's former Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, signaled Russia's embrace of multi-polarity. This marked the beginning of Russia's return to global stage and its aspirations to reassert its power—this time with other non-Western states. Primakov, accordingly, sought closer cooperation through the Russia, India, and China (RIC) strategic triangle conceptualized in December 1998 during his visit to New Delhi, and with Latin America, and led to the launch of several trilateral contacts on the side-lines of the UN General Assembly (Panova 2021).

Another manifestation of the security dimension comes to the fore with the Indo-Pacific quartet of Japan, Australia, the USA and India, the so-called Quad, or Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. Its genesis is very much a reaction to the rise of China, its island building and aggressive territorial claims as well as its all-directional Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Quad is novel in a number of ways, but its informal nature clearly stands out. It has no specific home or headquarters and confusingly encompasses a whole range of actors (security, economic, political) and attempts to address normative concerns across the Indo-Pacific (Pant and Rej 2018; Hakata and Cannon 2021). At the same time, its members have pushed their converging conceptions of the 'Indo-Pacific,' a maritime commons anchored by the quartet (Cannon and Hakata 2021). The ascendancy of the Indo-Pacific concept, in turn, has stretched the boundaries of identity and interests, allowing the potential for a broader Asia to be included—notwithstanding a lack of consensus on the nature and implications of this stretching (Demir 2020). While many things to many people, the Indo-Pacific is now official policy in both Japan and the USA. It also represents a direct challenge to ASEAN (Rossiter and Cannon 2020: 3–6).

From the perspective of countries beyond the G7, the culture of informality is far from new and has generated great attention in the IR literature (Vabulas and Snidal 2020; see also Libman and Obydenkova 2013; Fioretos 2019). Yet much of the literature has been devoted to analyzing various cases of informal institutions and/or the broad theoretical traits that may accompany their cascade. In addition, the tilt in the rationalist literature, in some cases, appears to have moved from one of neglect to a perspective that is not based on the animation of a calculated rationality but on the 'redistributive strategies of power bargaining and rhetorical coercion,' as Vabulas and Snidal (2020: 46) noted in their study of the BRICS.

More granular studies have concerned themselves almost exclusively with the degree to which intergovernmental interaction is (or is not) institutionalized and operationalized. Most notably, scholars have attempted to describe and explain the cascade we see from, say, the BRI to the BRI Forum as well as other BRI-spinoffs such as those focused on regions like the informal Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) (Rana and Ji 2019; Wu 2020). In doing so, these studies have elucidated our understanding of how such institutions may function but have told us very little about why and how they have cascaded so rapidly over the past two decades. Certainly, the cascade of informality that this special issue explores, catalogs,



and analyzes is much more than the simple increase referenced by many previous studies.

Rationalist IR has now engaged with this phenomenon in a position that is at odds with its previous neglect of informals. This is particularly the case in terms of international institutions that started with the G7 in the 1970s, but have subsequently cascaded outwards in several stages. This literature, nevertheless, remains deficient in delivering deeper insights into the genesis of informal institutions, their motivations, and modalities. In terms of overall analysis, there has been no serious attempt to re-assess the foundational contribution that privileged formal IOs, ignoring the G7 option. In addition, and notwithstanding the effort of rationalist IR scholars to catch up with the quantitative expansion of informal institutions, no effort has been made to introduce either sources or sensibilities from the Global South. If there has been a shift toward informal institutions, the logic of this turn is maintained to be the same as with formal IOs: efficiency on the basis of a universal logic of material self-interest. And, unlike our project, with authors based in Turkey, Singapore, China, Russia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Brazil, as well as the UK and Canada, the rationalist IR literature is exceedingly US-centric.

To be sure, states often prefer informality for reasons of functionality (Vabulas and Snidal 2013). Informality gives members with different perspectives and situations the means of alignment without a concomitant need to give up their autonomy to a supranational entity. In addition, informal organizations maintain decentralized structures when compared to their formal counterparts. This means that despite their club-iness, informal institutions neither demand discipline nor exhibit firm hierarchy. These hallmarks—selective membership combined with a sense of alignment as well as flexibility—allow for ‘trust-building’ among members.

Yet a one-size-fits-all explanation is unsatisfactory. Indeed, the motivations and modalities of informal institutions with a substantive membership within the Global South cannot be put into a uniform account. They may, for example, seek functionalities in informality by joining forces with others to confront a common security threat. Furthermore, the scope of informal institutions is often ambiguous. This means they can take on or avoid new actions depending on membership consensus.

This issue of consensus is evident in the G7 and G20. Nonetheless, the issue is magnified both because of sovereign concerns which can, in turn, amplified by unlike-ness. The G7, for instance, has had internal tensions, but not those exacerbated by territorial conflict. The BRICS, on the other hand, may work hard to present themselves as a cohesive, likeminded group, but there are fundamental sources of tension and competition between the members. In 2017, in a dramatic illustration, the BRICS summit was caught up in an intensifying geo-political contest between India and China punctuated by the Doklam standoff, with armed forces of the two countries facing off in the Sikkim sector of the China–India boundary (Papa and Verma 2021).

The BRICS were able to paper over this crisis at the informal BRICS meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the side-lines of the Hamburg G-20. Nevertheless, this type of situation creates a downside: papering interests involving core national interests may lead to not



only mistrust, but a feeling among members that the institution lacks organizational purpose.

Situating the special issue in intellectual and operational contexts

This special issue aims to fill a major gap in the existing literature by offering empirical, qualitative, and comparative insights into the cascading dynamic of informality beyond the original source of the G7. At one level, the project serves as a mapping exercise. At another level, however, the rationale behind the project is to animate an intellectual rethinking of the topic. In either case, we hope to decipher both the nature and consequences of the cascading dynamics of informal institutions. From a policy perspective, the special issue attempts to delve into the operationalization of practices as well as the outcomes of informal institutions.

What are the drivers of this ‘cascade of informality?’ As noted in the case of the G7, it is the perceived failings of the post-War formal organizations such as the UN that acted as the catalyst. But in terms of the extended cascade, other variables play a role including both anxiety about being left out of exclusive and hierarchical clubs such as the G7 and status aspirations.

If such a cascade brings rewards, it also brings risks. As noted, the cascade of informal institutions beyond the G7 does not bring with it like-mindedness. The BRICS, MIKTA, and the SCO bring together authoritarian states such as China and Russia and a number of democratic or quasi-democratic countries. Under these conditions, it is anticipated that informal institutions beyond the G7 will flow with very different currents (and waterfalls!). In some cases, it will move toward ‘nested formality.’³ In other cases, the core ingredient will be their relationship to other forums, whether the G20, the BRI Forum, or the Shangri-La security dialogue.

Assessing informal governance: from theory to practice

There is a near scholarly consensus that the trend of informality and growth in numbers of informal international organizations is an empirical fact. Moreover, informal institutions such as the BRICS, the MIKTA or the Quad are regarded as possessing commonalities in terms of club-iness, and relative openness, at least in theory if not in practice, to their self-selected members. Still, missing from the literature is an explanation of why the range of states engaged in these practices has expanded. No longer are informal institutions ‘owned’ exclusively by the traditional establishment, above all the US and the other G7 countries. Large, rising powers have embraced this model, as viewed by the BRICS, the SCO, and a variety of other groupings. But beyond these categories, medium states/middle powers have embraced the model

³ Nested formality refers to “... a series of intergovernmental programs, working groups, task forces, and expert networks...” assigned to achieve various objectives under the aegis of an organization such as the G7. They can become regular features or fixtures over time (Engelbrekt 2015, 539).



as well. From this perspective, the MIKTA may be conferred, at least in terms of perception, a special international status. That is, while the members of this forum are objectively not ‘great powers,’ the international status of states like Turkey and Mexico may be enhanced simply by belonging to such a club, and they may end up assuming certain responsibilities and roles collectively that individually they may eschew or, at the very least, are not generally expected to enact. This ‘constructed’ international status gained toward others by membership in an informal organization whose members span the globe and the international order itself may lend itself to their greater representation and roles at more formal international institutions such as the UN.

Informal institutions, those at the ‘lower’ end of the institutional spectrum, have also not been subject to the same rigorous theoretical or empirical analysis as formal organizations (Vabulas and Snidal 2013: 194). A pattern is evident that states increasingly prefer informal organizational arrangements that further their interests, increase their status amongst peer states and offer a range of collective opportunities to club members (Parlar Dal 2019a, 2019b). Yet, the rationalist institutionalist literature addresses the question of informality increasingly by shifting the analysis toward networks and public–private partnerships (Abbott and Snidal 2021). Such an approach is not unimportant. Still, it avoids the issue that much of the cascade with respect toward informal institutions beyond the G7 is state-driven. Some space is allowed for societal input, but this is subordinated to the state.

Highlighting many of these aspects and preferences, Andrew F. Cooper provides critical embellishments with regard to the overall trajectory of informal institutions in his article ‘A Critical Evaluation of Rationalist IR in the Analysis of Informal Institutions.’ In doing so, Cooper highlights the dominant feature of the cascading of informality: the sheer expansion in scope with respect to the dynamic of outward emanation; in other words, a cascade. Informality is ascendant even though some of the rest of the Global South remains excluded and marginalized (Payne 2010). Nevertheless, the number of prominent participants from this ‘global majority’ is unanticipated, both in terms of relatively new and relatively low-visibility informal institutions such as MIKTA, and in terms of the breakthrough, notably via the G20, by non-incumbents to top-tier informal institutions.

Another aim of Cooper’s prescient article is to interrogate the deficiencies of the mainstream rationalist institutional-oriented IR literature. Operating on the assumption that all states act according to the logic of instrumental calculations about their approaches to international organizations, the rationalist-oriented analysis scholarship has the value of shifting the focus of IR research onto the competition between formal and informal institutions or, as this literature puts it, formal and informal intergovernmental institutions. For Cooper, IR scholarship needs to move beyond the US-centric and Western-oriented literature and examples and take into account the groundbreaking scholarship coming out of the Global South, thereby filling in a set of neglected gaps by offering more nuanced and accurate portrayals of individual institutions. At the same time, Cooper raises the critical point that deficiencies of the mainstream rationalist institutionalist literature, generally, and rational design literature, in particular, should be treated not simply as deficiencies of omission, but also as deficiencies of commission. Indeed, accuracy falls short when mainstream



IR literature on informals attempts to move beyond tracing the sheer scope of this shift toward informality.

While scholars such as Vabulas and Snidal (2020) and Roger (2020) have concentrated on documenting the diffuseness of the cascade of informal institutions, Cooper homes in on the premise that some informal institutions are more important than others and therefore merit greater attention. In turn, the organizational nuances among informal institutions are commonly overlooked. For example, the BRICS, the IBSA (the trilateral grouping of India, Brazil, South Africa) and the MIKTA are incorrectly conflated. Cooper persuasively argues that only through a recalibration toward qualitative analysis can the pitfalls apparent in a rigid, quantitative approach be overcome. It is significant, for instance, that the BRICS has not only continued in a highly visible fashion (notwithstanding some significant internal differences) but has taken a formal turn by creating the New Development Bank (NDB). The IBSA, in contrast, has faded away. The MIKTA, for its part, seems largely stillborn given its leaders' lack of focus and the absence of a single issue that binds the members together.

Cooper demonstrates how mainstream IR scholarship can move beyond generalized parsimony if it pays more attention to the features of institutions themselves and does more than comparing informal with formal institutions. Paying closer attention to details such as the institutional make-up and set of issues that bind (or do not bind) members together, Cooper argues, would allow IR scholars the predictive ability to gauge an informal institution's durability in a more refined and accurate fashion. Here, it is the need for a research agenda that builds in the qualitative dimension of differentiation that comes to the fore. One of the main paradoxes in the rational design literature is the disjunction between caution and over-statement.

The fundamental takeaway, according to Cooper, is that rationalist institutionalism generally, and rational design specifically, should not be given an uncontested position despite its stated aim to provide a logical, quantitative grounding to the analysis. Indeed, if mainstream rationalist-oriented IR literature deserves the credit for the initial probing of question relating to institutional choice, they lack any legacy claims to an appropriateness of inquiry. Shining through is the disjunction in analysis between caution (with a lag time between when an institution is created and a focus on its activities) and over-statement (with a reluctance to shift from assumptions of rationality). Cooper argues instead for a deeper, more discrete recognition of the qualitative dimensions relating of differentiation, deepening and diversification, with a privileging of a different, multifaceted, and inclusive research agenda. This alternative form of privileging should ideally act as a countervailing mode of analysis, one that takes into account to full range of *global* scholarship related to the cascading nature of informality.

Tristen Naylor's 'The Spread of Informal Governance Practices in G-Summitry' goes back to the original source: scrutinizing G-Summitries, both through the G7 and the G20, as informal governance cases with both similar and different governance policies and practices. Naylor, for example, underlines that despite the fact that the G20 adopted some the G7 practices, key procedures that have been central to the success of the G7 do not necessarily engender the same at the G20. The practices of intimate engagement, informal exchange, consensus decision making, and



outreach engagement were the constituting patterns of G7's informality. Naylor highlights that all of these were transmitted to the G20, but with the effect that they seem to weaken the potential success of the club mainly due to its larger size and heterogeneous composition. Nevertheless, the practices of conspicuous governance and exclusive multilateralism have been successfully transposed to the G20 since. Naylor demonstrates the enactment of these two practices has not created rivalries among its members and has not been used for the benefit of any individual club member. Instead, despite the fact they are often economic and political rivals, these two informal practices strengthen cooperation among G20 members. The size of the club also matters: small- and medium-size clubs like the G20 tend to operationalize practices more efficiently than larger clubs.

Conspicuous governance and exclusive multilateralism are relevant in relation to the G20's position and role in the international system, which can also be defined in terms of status. However, as Naylor reminds us, it would be an error to assume that these two practices might create success in other type of informal structures that are less heterogeneous and numerous. What is striking for Naylor is that the practices of governance which fit both the G7 and the G20 are those which are status-oriented, and which project the semblance of control. Through such an analysis, the author proves that different G-summitry groups work in different ways and that the same governance practices can achieve different results due to the varying composition and size of the clubs. In short, a one-size-fits-all approach is inappropriate to evaluate and analyze the practices and policies of G-summitry groups. As such, this nuance must be necessarily considered while assessing their performance. By relating this insightful conclusion to the existing studies on rising powers and status-seeking, Naylor concludes that the status-related practices that have been successfully transmitted from the G7 to the G20 play a crucial role in its successful achievements both Gs. This is because the self-esteem and prestige gained by states as a result of their inclusion in such groups also contribute to third countries' positive perception of the G clubs in terms of their credibility and efficacy. (Parlar Dal 2019a, 2019b; Parlar Dal and Dipama 2019).

Oliver Stuenkel explains Brazil's transition from a country heavily engaged in formal IOs to one that now leads in informal club membership in his article 'How Brazil Embraced Informal Organizations.' Stuenkel first analyzes Brazil's turn toward informal institutions and the visibility it gained with the rise of BRICS grouping. Second, the author keeps a keen eye on the frustration felt and expressed by Brazilian leaders about the dominant Western-centered international system, one that continues to favor developed countries over the Rest. Stuenkel then explores the reasons behind Brazil's preference for informal international institutions since the advent of the new millennium, highlighting it has been part and parcel of Brazil's status-seeking strategy on the international stage.

Stuenkel's analysis goes far beyond the current debates on informality by offering a number of lessons learned from Brazil's engagements with informal international institutions. Firstly, informal international institutions can help emerging economic and political giants like Brazil to upgrade their status in the international system. Stuenkel's article provides further evidence that rising powers like Brazil, Turkey or Mexico—all of which can be said to be dissatisfied with their underrepresentation



in multilateral organizations—consistently seek to increase their international recognition and visibility in the international system. Second, as seen in the Brazilian case, the rapid changes occurring in emerging powers' domestic politics and related policies may adversely impact their level of engagement with formal IOs. In this regard, club membership in informal international organizations may mitigate these unfavorable effects such as their diplomatic isolation in times of domestic crisis. Indeed, the case of Brazil showcases that the club-like environment fostered by informal international institutions seems to offer their members a certain level of diplomatic protection by other club members. That informal international institutions may be much more resilient to the rise of populism and anti-globalism is a third and highly prescient point offered by Stuenkel. For the author, the cascade we are seeing in informals can largely be chalked up to a specific demand that remains unmet by formal international organizations. Because they go some way in meeting these demands, informals tend to outlive the specific conditions under which they emerged, as seen in Brazil's continued and strong activism in informal international institutions. For the author, the case of Brazil clearly illustrates the multifaceted functionality as well as the importance of the cascade of informals in global governance. The article's assessment of the reasons behind the propensity for informalism in Brazilian foreign policy also offers an important addition to the current IR scholarship, a literature that lacks studies on informality and emerging powers—particularly from the Global South.

Informality and IOs: past achievements and future prospects

Ye Yu analyzes the role of informal institutions and the changing nature of sovereign debt management in 'Global Coordination on Sovereign Debt and Development: The G20 "New Governance" Beyond the Paris Club.' Because the contentious issue of sovereign debt treatment lies between established formal and informal institutions, commercial creditors long insisted that sovereign debt treatment should be country specific. Accordingly, sovereign debt restructuring and associated measures were the preserve of a Western-dominated list of states, the so-called London Club and, more importantly, the 'Paris Club.' As sovereign bonds replaced traditional loans and became the most dominant format of emerging economies' international borrowing (particularly after dozens of debt restructuring cases under 'the Brady Plan' since the end of 1980s), the 'collective action clauses' (CACs) were introduced into the bond contracts in the early 2000s. These have become the most important coordination mechanism for private creditors' sovereign debt restructuring.

A dichotomy between the 'contractual approach' and the 'mandatory approach' has developed on sovereign debt resolution, according to Ye, with the former prevailing in scholarly literature. However, the practice of sovereign debt resolution is actually embracing a third way, one that occupies a middle solution, what can be called the 'new governance' approach to sovereign debt settlement. This incorporates more case-specific negotiation on sovereign debt resolution and incentivizes consensus-building between debtor and creditor, as well as cooperation across a range of public and private creditors, with a special role for a private creditors'



committee as a governance mechanism in promoting coordination (Park and Samples 2021). In adopting these practices, the private sectors' committees are deemed to exhibit greater flexibility as compared to the autonomous CACs mechanism. Ye's article, accordingly, draws on this evolving theoretical framework, but shifts the focus to the evolution of the global coordination of official creditors, especially the new G20-led coordination of the emerging creditors and the traditional Paris Club members, and in leveraging private sector participation.

In a timely fashion, Ye pays particular attention to the contextual changes wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic and offers an extensive analysis of the incremental expansion of official creditors' coordination facilitated by the G20 Leaders' Summitry and its associated institutional arrangements. The G20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative for the poorest countries (DSSI) and the related Common Framework for Debt Treatment beyond the DSSI, for example, mark the beginning of formal coordination between the G20 emerging creditor countries and the Paris Club nations. Ye's case study—entirely in line with Cooper's argument that qualitative details matter when informals are analyzed—illustrates the value of the G20-led informal 'new governance' mechanisms in responding to the highly politicalized issue of reaching international agreement on sovereign debt management, especially as the 'non-incumbents' play such a central role in the debt settlement processes. To make her case, the author first details the evolution of Paris Club-centered sovereign debt treatment before she examines the significance of the G20-led DSSI and the associated Common Framework for sovereign debt treatments coordination between the traditional and the new creditor countries, including its potential in leveraging public and private coordination, as well as the challenges to overcome. Ye then takes sovereign debt treatment of the poorest countries as an important issue of global development governance. She argues that the DSSI and the Common Framework could act as a new channel for the two sides to manage their development competition and build consensus on historical burden sharing and development policies and practices. The G20's potential role in driving gradual changes after repeated failures in the long term concludes the article. In particular, Ye homes in on the G20's significant value can be found in its 'use of the useless,' i.e., providing an inclusive and flexible platform for major shareholders with contrasting values and interests to exchange views and build consensus through repeated failures. For example, the proposal that G20 should establish a Sovereign Debt Coordination Group that includes borrowers and collective representatives of official and commercial creditors is flawed, according to the author, because this kind of new mechanism is only to facilitate rather than replace the well-established bottom-up approach of sovereign debt treatment. In short, Ye contends persuasively that institutions should learn from their historical experience and lessons and play the role of an 'honest' third party, without affecting the fairness of their decision making due to their creditor status or other political factors.

Mely Caballero-Anthony puts ASEAN's peculiar type of informality at the center of her article, 'The ASEAN Way and the Changing Security Environment: Navigating Challenges to Informality and Centrality.' She does so in order to investigate whether ASEAN's informal institutionalization helps it assume regional security governance in an effective manner.



Caballero-Anthony first analyzes the reasons behind ASEAN's choices of informal processes, and how these choices affect its regional security actorness and the way it responds to current global challenges and crises. Second, it delves into the assessment of ASEAN's ability to respond to the global challenges its members have recently been facing, and the way the decades-old institutions has done so. In line with these objectives, Caballero-Anthony's main argument is that the 'ASEAN way' still maintains a prominence and has credibility in regional security-related issues despite a multiplicity of regional and global crises. Nevertheless, ASEAN needs to recalibrate its security actorness by using its informal processes more effectively. According to the author, doing so might render the institution more responsive to both the existing pandemic crisis and future predicaments.

A particularly interesting addition to the IR literature on international organizations is Cabellero-Anthony's finding that formality and informality can coexist. This is seen clearly in the ASEAN case. According to the author, the ASEAN way of formality has its own narrative of institutionalization, which is not legalistic and is different from that of mainstream rationalist-institutionalist literature. She demonstrates this exciting point by showcasing ASEAN's numerous political- and security-related mechanisms, to include the ARF, EAS, and ADMM+, as well as economic initiatives like the AEC, APT, and RCEP, which are also informed by institutionalist factors of cooperation.

In conclusion, Cabellero-Anthony contends that despite its lack of formal structures, ASEAN's regional influence has gradually grown over time across the Indo Pacific, and its global reach has gained commensurate prominence more recently, especially in several formal and informal institutions. According to the author, although it has a charter and has adopted a three-pillared community, the path toward formalization is not linear. Nonetheless, the ASEAN way of institutionalization—a unique mix of formality and informality—should not be taken for granted. ASEAN must continue to strengthen its community-building processes and its regional actorness in order to ensure its members' adherence to democratic and human right principles, and the rule of law. In addition, as Cabellero-Anthony stresses, there is an ever-growing need to increase ASEAN's credibility and centrality in the eyes of both its own members and other states and international organizations.

Institutional processes, cascading effects, and informal networking

A number of scholars have contributed to the quantitative analysis of the spread of informal institutions. In doing so, they point to the diffuse nature of this phenomenon. Roger's work is especially impressive as a model of this type of scholarship (Roger 2020; see also Dingwerth 2021). Building on the mixed methods research of Vabulas and Snidal (2013), Roger calculates the existence of 224 informal international institutions, with a rapid increase in the post-Cold War era. By 2005, informal international institutions are estimated to be one-third of the overall active scope of international organizations as a whole (Roger 2020: 8). Yet, it must be reiterated that informal institutions are neither created nor operated equally. Indeed, twenty-first-century global governance has been defined by the emergence, evolution, and



increasingly effective performance of three apex plurilateral summit institutions (PSIs) with global relevance and reach: the G20, the BRICS, and the SCO. These PSIs emerged in response to the growing demand for global governance in a rapidly globalizing world, according to John Kirton and Marina Larionova. All three PSIs are animated via leaders' meetings, held annually at least, where informal, flexible dynamics, understandings and synergistic cross subject linkages dominated the legal and organizational edifice erected below. And all were developed due to the critical policy choices of China, Russia and India—their key common members and the world's largest countries in terms of population or territory—whose relative capability and international connectivity generally rose. What makes Kirton and Larionova's article so unique is that it is the first to compare and contrast the SCO with the BRICS and the G20. The connections between the three—all led and driven by three non-Western large powers—make this logically sound and intuitive.

Kirton and Larionova's study traces the convergent, cooperative, and cumulative global governance of the three PSIs by examining their institutional development and summit performance. The visionary pioneers, creation, mission, members, participants, summit frequency, time and place, institutional development and outreach are identified for each PSI. Further, their performance, measured through their expanding summit policy agendas and public conclusions, commitments, compliance, and institutional development within and beyond themselves, is reviewed. The authors' analysis shows how each PSI moved from a very different, potentially competitive starting point to a more common, cooperative one, with a combined, cumulative impact on global governance as a whole.

Kirton and Larionova first tackle the G20, demonstrating through their qualitative research and tracing that it has led the pack in terms of cascade-like dynamics by its incorporation of all major BRICS and SCO members and guests. In addition, the G20 has made conscious and successful efforts to involve major multilateral organizations in a broad spectrum of governing functions and policy domains. It is these findings in relation to the G20 and its convergence with the BRICS and the SCO that greatly expand the literature on the extended 'cascade' of informal organizations. Specifically, the authors highlight how the integration of non-G20 countries and transnational engagement groups have consistently enhanced the informal international institution's effectiveness, legitimacy and leadership role. In turn, its premier role in the global governance architecture is reflected in the reiterated commitments and support of the G20 goals and decisions by the BRICS and the G7.

Every bit as intriguing is the authors' exploration of the BRICS, which arose from a Russian initiative, but has been driven largely on equal terms between Russia, China, India, Brazil and, from 2010, South Africa. Indeed, Kirton and Larionova point to South Africa's importance despite its relatively small geographic and population footprint. It made the BRICS more global and balanced between democracies and non-democracies and, in the process, converged with the G20 in both respects. In terms of cascading dynamics, the BRICS has involved fewer multilateral organizations than the G20, but the informal institution has been stronger in terms of engagement groups and outreach countries. In addition, the BRICS has relied more on its own deepening institutional network in order to improve overall performance.



While comparisons of the BRICS and the G20 do exist, none has been linked with an analysis of the SCO, a security organization that has far too often has been dismissed by skeptical and scholars from the West. Kirton and Larionova, therefore, provide findings and balanced analyses that are neither overly supportive nor hyper-critical. In doing so, the authors point to the SCO's cascade-like dynamics in that it now features the addition of four observer states and six dialogue partners. In turn, its formal and expanding cooperation with regional and international organizations has focused primarily on security and stability, fighting terrorism, drug trafficking and transnational organized crime. Where it diverges significantly from the G20 and the BRICS is in its involvement of multilateral organizations, its Business Council and the SCO Forum, both of which have remained limited.

One of the many strengths of Kirton and Larionova's work is found in its distinctive contributions to the literature about informal institutions and their cascading effects. Of note, their article treats the three PSIs interactively, focusing on how each has interacted with and influenced the others, especially through the visions and initiatives of their two common, non-western, major power members of China and India. It considers them, not only according to the standard categories of co-operators or competitors, but also by their cumulative effect, each adding value where and when the others fail, to produce a better governed world. In addition, their article challenges the dominant view in Western literature that these three institutions are in a state of decline. Instead, Kirton and Larionova show that each of these three informal institutions has individually continued to grow in their institutionalization and influence, and in their cumulative impact on global governance as a whole. It thus suggests that the rise of non-western major powers, led by China and India, can successfully share power with the established western incumbents in ways that could eventually cope with genuinely global common threats such as COVID-19 and climate change.

Complementing Kirton and Larionova's article is Gregory T. Chin's 'Summitry and Corporate-Government Relations for the Belt and Road.' Chin's article examines the existence and importance of informal dimensions in the BRI, with a special focus on the so-called Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, or BRF, an international political and economic forum first held in the Chinese capital in 2017, and a complementary focus on the role of Multinational Companies, or MNCs. Chin's primary research method involves cross-verification of the data collected as well as a critical review of the relevant secondary literature sources. In doing so, he is able to analyze the intermittence between the informal and formal components of President Xi Jinping's signature BRI.

Chin's findings offer a great deal that is new to the burgeoning literature about the BRI. Importantly, his research highlights the existence of salient informal components in the BRI in the form of foreign government and corporate participation at the 2017 inaugural BRF and the 2019 follow-on BRF, as well as in the lead-up to the informal summits, and their aftermath. The author stresses out that the BRFs provide an opportunity for a large range of stakeholders from global multilateral institutions to MNCs, NGOs, and think-tanks to meet in an informal style and setting in order to discuss and harmonize their interests and actions. In turn, the organization of large BRFs helps to mitigate the growing tensions surrounding China's BRI, particularly



from western states. Additionally, Chin finds that the BRFs appear to diminish the level of incoherence between states as well as between states and corporations, and can thus be considered as a benchmark to measure the overall success of the BRI.

Chin finds that due to the huge business opportunities they may gain from the BRI, some key MNCs, especially from the USA and Germany, have adopted the BRI. Indeed, they have increased their participation in the successive BRFs despite the increasing suspicions about China's BRI in their home countries. In turn, Chinese officials have made some effort to attract, increase, and capitalize on the confidence of these MNCs in the BRI. They have done so by engaging in 'foreign' corporate-government diplomacy for the BRI and for each BRF. This demonstrates, according to Chin, the input of informal corporate diplomacy and corporate-government engagement for the BRI. Yet, the author underlines that these informal elements and processes are particularly useful for managing the negative reactions against the BRI from prominent western states and for softening over tensions and incoherence between states, and between government and corporate agendas in the BRI.

In their article 'Locating the Quad: Informality, Institutional Flexibility, and Future Alignment in the Indo-Pacific,' Brendon J. Cannon & Ash Rossiter investigate the Quad's informal characteristics, as well as its purposes and functionalities. While the authors consider informality as a geopolitical necessity in order to bring together Japan, Australia, the USA, and India, they also underline its usefulness in finding common ground for both the divergent security priorities of its members and for dealing with the increasing challenges posed by China. In doing so, Cannon and Rossiter tend to assess what Quad's informality represents beyond its quarter-power alignment in the eyes of its members and of third parties. They first delve into the assessment of the functionality of and the expectations about the Quad. Second, they try to assess the reasons behind the adoption of a highly informal nature for the Quad by its members.

On the surface, the Quad is chiefly a mechanism of dialogue for self-described 'like-minded countries'; it is formalized only in that meeting occur regularly, albeit with no set plans, few announcements, or locations. Because the Quad's unit relations are not bound by rules, there is a sense of equality among the four as members of an exclusive club. Indeed, unlike formal security or political intergovernmental organizations, there is no attempt to negotiate, let alone impose, binding rules or codes of conduct on the members.

Cannon and Rossiter argue that informality is a good fit to the Quad since this type of institutionalization puts lesser obligations on its members and facilitates their ongoing communication and coordination despite a range of divergent interests and policies vis-à-vis China. The Quad's informality continues to deliver sufficient instrumental benefits for its members without asking too much of them. Members can be candid with one another behind closed doors, providing a useful forum for officials to exchange information and to socialize future policy initiatives within the group. The fact that the quartet continues to meet together, online or in-person, across administrations and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, matters a great deal. The meetings provide a private, informal, mutually constitutive and self-reinforcing environment. This resonates not just in the four club capitals



but, as importantly, in Beijing. Much more than a talk-shop, this informal, albeit highly exclusive club has strengthened coordination among its members in the field of security, in general, and in maritime security, in particular.

In the final analysis, Cannon and Rossiter contend that in an age of informality in global governance, the Quad's informality and flexibility will remain unchanged as a result of its members' preference of loose commitments over strict ones. In a short time, and despite what many see as grave deficiencies, the Quad members have channeled their attention to shared common interests—especially China, but also pandemic recovery and other non-traditional security areas—in order to address on them. That progress is incremental is unimportant. The Quad works because its informality signals alignment to Beijing without provocation.

Emel Parlar Dal and Samiratou Dipama's explore and analyze the linkages between the networking capacity of informal groupings and effective actorness in global governance from a state-centric perspective in their article, 'Assessing Network Power Capacity of Informal International Governmental Organizations: BRICS and MIKTA cases.' Their main hypothesis is that investing in the strengthening of networking capacity can enhance states'—and especially rising powers'—actorness in global governance. To test this, Parlar Dal and Dipama developed an innovative Network Power Capacity (NPC) framework based on five independent variables, namely 1) the existence of strong states within informal groupings; 2) the existence of strong economic and institutional ties among members of an informal institutions; 3) the sharing of common norms, values, and culture among members of informal organizations; 4) the level of power symmetry among members of an informal grouping; and 5) the engagement of informal organization members of in existing established powers' networks (through the signature of agreements).

When compared to the MIKTA, Parlar Dal and Dipama find that the BRICS enjoys a stronger and more effective NPC in global governance because of its higher performance on four out of five variables. Indeed, the authors' research uncovered that the grouping of the BRICS benefits from a stronger NPC in global governance due to the existence of powerful states like China, India, and Russia within the group. In addition, its members enjoy equal institutional but stronger economic ties, share common non-democratic norms which often leads to common reactions by the BRICS members in global affairs, and, lastly, have relatively stronger engagement with established powers, namely the European Union (EU) and the USA. In contrast, Parlar Dal and Dipama's empirical analysis highlights that the only variable in which the MIKTA performed better than the BRICS was on the level of power symmetry between members of the group. This is because unlike the BRICS case where the Chinese factor exponentially widens the power gap between its members, in the MIKTA case, all members hold nearly equal levels of power (Cooper and Parlar Dal 2016; Parlar Dal and Kursun 2016).

Dal and Dipama's research findings further emphasize the higher NPC of the BRICS group compared to that of the MIKTA has been relatively translated into a more effective stance of this group in global governance issues. To illustrate this point, the authors underline the relative success registered by the BRICS countries in their common quest through joint communique for key reforms in the IMF and the World Bank (Stuenkel 2013) since these pledges have been mentioned in the



G20 Communiqués and have been translated into action in the IMF with the reform package undertaken in 2010 which improved the quota share of China and Russia, particularly. The BRICS countries' strong adherence to the non-intervention principle and their criticisms against their perceived western powers' double standards in the use of sanctions have most often than not led to a common reaction of the group in international stances as demonstrated by their condemnation of the western sanctions imposed on Russia since 2014 and their abstention to vote for a UN Resolution on Libya in 2011 as well as China and Russia's persisting use of veto in the Syrian crisis. The creation of the BRICS' New Development Bank as an alternative to the status quo International Financial Institutions is another indication of this group's increasing influence on global governance issues, which influence has partly been favored by their relatively higher NPC. Yet, the capacity of the BRICS countries to exert influence on global governance issues through the harmonization of their interests is sometimes limited by a frequent trade-off of the group's common interests with each country's self-interests calculation, and this is exemplified by the lack of support that Russia and China provide to India and Brazil in their quest for permanent status in the UNSC and by China and Russia's vote for UN sanctions against Iran despite that Brazil was making efforts to avoid these sanctions and solve the issue through mediation (Laidi 2011, p.11). The authors argue that the MIKTA group's influence in global governance is more limited to several joint communiqués made occasionally on some international issues without any practical actions taken to translate their policies into practice and that the MIKTA countries do not seem to openly share a common ambition regarding the issue of reforming the current international system. The authors point out that the MIKTA group has a great potential to increase their NPC and strengthen their influence in the field of development cooperation and several practical steps such as the launch on January 29, 2021, of the 'MIKTA Development Cooperation Institutions Network' are already being taken in this vein.

Parlar Dal and Dipama finally highlight the key role networking can play in the peaceful transition of power in the global system as well as in the socialization of actors in informal groupings as it enhances cooperation and bargaining among actors. By including a network perspective into the analysis of informality in global governance, the authors highlight the possibilities for rising powers to benefit from flexible governance structures, while at the same time widening and deepening cooperation with the major powers and other formal intergovernmental organizations. Parlar Dal and Dipama conclude by showing that in their quest for enhanced legitimacy in global governance, informal groupings such as the MIKTA and the BRICS should augment their network power capacity both inside and outside the group. In short, networking through informal institutions allows rising powers to manage the ever-shifting power trends of the international system more efficiently.

The extended contours of global governance are increasingly complex. Indeed, a one-size-fits-all approach to international institutions, given their number and scope, is no longer possible and, if taken, would be deeply flawed. Despite the criticism leveled at IOs and their perceived loss of clout in major areas of global governance, they continue to not only function, but maintain their relevance in the international system. That said, the ascendancy of informal institutions is compelling with respect



to the landscape of global governance. At a basic level, the research findings produced in this special issue support previous studies' conclusions that the perceived failings of the post-War formal organizations can account for some of this cascade. Yet, our analyses highlight the range of motivations and modalities that drive this phenomenon beyond the G7.

Benefits accruing to members of informal institutions in terms of autonomy of action, exit options, and the privilege of belonging to an exclusive club stand out. The latter point is particularly prescient for Global South countries like South Africa and Brazil as well as Turkey, Mexico, and Indonesia, which were all sidelined for most of the post-War era. The research on the MIKTA and the BRICS, in particular, but also on the Quad in terms of India's membership, demonstrates the deep ambivalence felt by these states toward more formal, Western-dominated organizations. Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (2019), addressing the UN General Assembly, unequivocally stated that the challenges the world faces are a direct result of injustice on a global scale. He recalled that the creation of the UN was intended to eradicate such injustice. His statements have particular resonance in the Global South and have been echoed by multiple leaders. Herein lies the potential power of informals, as states like India and Brazil are able to achieve, to some degree, their long-held desire to promulgate international norms through policies and strategies developed in tandem with other club members. In turn, they put their unique stamp on concepts and policies associated with the organizations, such as India's insistence that the Indo-Pacific is inclusive of all as well as in its push for a spin-off Quad in the form of the 'Quad Plus.'

Such driving forces add to the strength of the cascade's flow. But the constraints are evident as well. The utility of the BRICS—notwithstanding tensions between India and China, and the outlier status of Russia—may now be self-evident. Not so with the MIKTA... yet. This may have as much to do with leadership roles, as pointed out by Parlar Dal and Dipama, as it does with power symmetry. Asymmetry in power in the BRICS in the form of China's preponderant role is balanced to some considerable extent by the role of Russia and India. The same can be said for the SCO, with China and Russia taking the lead and the Central Asian states following. In contrast, power symmetry between the MIKTA members means that leadership is either lacking and/or contested. This may explain its underperformance as an institution, but an explanation may also lie in its lack of homogeneous issues that bind its members together. The more security-orientated organizations, for instance, such as the SCO and the Quad seem relatively agile in addressing issues related to their narrower, agreed-upon issue scope: ensuring political stability and continuity in Eurasia that is favorable to its prime members for the SCO (and keeping unwanted external state meddlers out), and addressing the various, albeit distinct threats posed by China for the Quad members. This does not mean in the Quad's case, for example, that it will take a stand on India's border dispute with China or Japan's island dispute with China. Rather, it allows them to send signals to China that any sort of broadly aggressive behavior will not be countenanced. Informality, thus, allows the members to club together about China while avoiding contested issues such as each member's strong economic ties or various stances on Taiwan.



In overall terms, the cascade of informality since the early 2000s has had large if still under-appreciated implications regarding the current global governance architecture. The cluster of articles in this special issue aims to address the deficiencies in the literature by a concerted focus of the cascading nature and impact of informal institutions beyond the original G7. In doing so, the articles also address the imbalance in the literature beyond the operational sites to the intellectual contributions pertaining to this phenomenon. The sustained focus on a broader range of voices, and non-rationalist perspectives, we assess, will not only enlighten the understanding about the genesis of informal institutions but also the features of informality, their utility, and future projection.

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