

The Constraints of International Organizations' Autonomy on Countries' Compliance with International Commitments

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ABSTRACT

Robert O. Keohane, in *After Hegemony*, argues that reputation explains why countries comply with international commitments. He later sought empirical support for this view, but the results were less conclusive than expected. While international commitments represent a country's pledge to follow global norms, Keohane links their fulfillment to the preservation of national reputation, suggesting that fear of reputational damage incentivizes compliance. However, like individuals obeying domestic laws not just for protection but to avoid punishment, states often comply due to coercive enforcement. This enforcement typically comes from international organizations, whose ability to constrain states depends on their autonomy and power. Therefore, the primary factor driving compliance is the authority of these organizations, while reputation serves as a secondary motivation.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the rapid evolution of global challenges—ranging from climate change and biodiversity loss to global pandemics—has challenged the traditional state-centric model of international relations. While states remain the primary actors in the international system, the ability of international organizations (IOs) to influence global norms and behavior has become increasingly visible. A central question arises: why do states comply with international commitments, especially in the absence of direct coercive enforcement?

Robert O. Keohane (2005), representing neoliberal institutionalism, once argued that reputation serves as a major factor in encouraging state compliance with international rules. However, empirical evidence later revealed that reputational concerns alone are often insufficient to explain durable compliance. This observation leads to the need to re-examine the role of international organizations—not just as facilitators of cooperation, but as autonomous entities capable of constraining state behavior.

While realists view IOs as tools of powerful states and institutionalists focus on cooperative incentives, constructivist and autonomy-oriented scholars argue that IOs can evolve into semi-independent actors with their own agendas, bureaucratic structures, and normative authority. In particular, the power of IOs does not always stem from material capabilities but from informational asymmetries, normative legitimacy, and issue salience—dimensions that enable them to exert influence even on sovereign states.

This study seeks to contribute to the enrichment of institutional theory by focusing on the autonomous power of international organizations—especially their ability to constrain states through informational authority, organizational legitimacy, and issue distance from traditional security concerns. It proposes that IOs with higher levels of autonomy are more likely to enforce international commitments effectively. The Montreal Protocol, a global environmental agreement, serves as a key empirical case to demonstrate how non-coercive authority can produce binding compliance on an issue far removed from national military or strategic interests.

Therefore, this paper aims to explore: how does the autonomous power of international organizations shape state compliance behavior? What conditions enhance or constrain this autonomy? And how can informational power complement traditional understandings of international authority? By addressing these questions, this study offers both theoretical insight and practical understanding of IOs as influential actors in the international system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Realist Perspectives: International Organizations as Instruments of Power

Realist scholars have long maintained that international organizations (IOs) primarily serve the strategic interests of powerful states. Morgenthau (1985) argues that what appears to be rule-abiding behavior often stems from converging interests or prevailing power relations. He notes that states tend to resist the restrictive effects of international law unless it aligns with their national

goals. Similarly, Mearsheimer (1995) contends that IOs cannot prevent conflict or fundamentally alter state behavior, as national interest and the pursuit of relative power continue to dominate decision-making. Gruber (2000) further warns against assuming that international institutions inherently create common benefits, arguing that dominant states often shape outcomes to serve their preferences, compelling weaker states to adjust accordingly.

2. Neoliberal Institutionalism: Cooperation Through Institutional Platforms

In contrast, neoliberal institutionalism accepts the anarchic nature of the international system but views IOs as vital platforms for cooperation. Keohane (2005) emphasizes that institutions can reduce uncertainty, codify norms, and lower transaction costs through repeated interactions, encouraging compliance for long-term gains. While Keohane initially attributed state compliance to concerns over reputation, subsequent empirical studies indicated that reputational factors alone offer an insufficient explanation for sustained commitment.

3. Constructivism: Normative Authority and Identity Transformation

Constructivist thinkers highlight the socializing power of IOs in shaping state identity and preferences. Arend (1999) points out that institutional frameworks create normative environments in which states gradually internalize shared rules. Barnett and Finnemore (2012) go further, asserting that IOs develop rational-legal, moral, and professional authority that extends beyond state delegation. Drawing on Max Weber's theory of bureaucracy, they argue that IOs can act autonomously to produce rules and "social knowledge," sometimes in ways that deviate from member states' original intentions. IOs such as the World Bank and IMF exemplify this trend, actively exporting governance models and market norms globally.

4. Autonomy Theory: Institutional Behavior and Issue Salience

Building on constructivism, scholars like Cox and Jacobson (1973) suggest that IOs exhibit varying degrees of autonomy based on their functional type and the salience of issues they address. Forum-type organizations with weak bureaucracies and highly politicized mandates, like the UN Security Council, often have limited autonomous influence. In contrast, service-oriented IOs like the IMF and World Bank, dealing with less politically sensitive issues, tend to have well-developed bureaucracies and greater latitude in shaping outcomes. Skocpol (2014) extends this logic by viewing IOs as resource-extracting actors, capable of developing interests and strategies independent of dominant state agendas.

5. Informational Power: Authority Through Knowledge Asymmetry

Beyond formal structures, recent research emphasizes the informational advantage held by IOs. Nye and Owens (1996) conceptualize information as a strategic resource in global politics. Pettigrew (1972) and French & Raven (1959) argue that control over critical knowledge flows constitutes a distinct form of power. Applied to IOs, this means that organizations with access to privileged,

technical, or scientific information—such as UNEP or WHO—can shape global standards and policy even in the absence of coercive power. Cheng and Liu (2019) highlight how IOs leverage asymmetrical access to data to influence weaker actors, reinforcing hierarchical structures in the global information system.

Collectively, these perspectives provide a multidimensional theoretical foundation for analyzing the autonomous influence of international organizations. While early theories centered on state control and cooperation, newer approaches emphasize how IOs evolve into semi-independent agents with normative, bureaucratic, and informational authority. This study builds on these insights by examining how such autonomy affects state compliance with international commitments, using the Montreal Protocol as a case study to illustrate the mechanisms and outcomes of institutional constraint.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on textual analysis and theory-guided case study. The research does not involve human participants but instead focuses on analyzing scholarly literature, institutional documents, and historical developments in international environmental governance.

The Montreal Protocol is used as a purposive case, selected for its distinctiveness in demonstrating how international organizations, particularly the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), exercised autonomous authority in shaping state behavior. The case exemplifies high issue salience, information asymmetry, and the absence of traditional military-security interests—all conditions that allow organizational autonomy to become visible and influential.

Data sources include primary documents such as official decisions and declarations from UNEP and the Ozone Secretariat, as well as scientific literature documenting the institutional response to ozone depletion. Theoretical references are drawn from international relations literature, including realism, institutionalism, constructivism, and autonomy theory.

Analytical methods employed are interpretive and comparative in nature. The study evaluates how informational authority, organizational legitimacy, and bureaucratic capacity of IOs interact with state compliance behaviors. Theoretical insights are synthesized with empirical developments to generate a coherent understanding of how international organizations evolve into semi-autonomous agents capable of exercising constraint over sovereign states.

RESEARCH RESULT

Based on the methodological approach outlined above, this section presents the findings from a case study of the Montreal Protocol. The case illustrates how international organizations, through autonomous authority and informational power, influenced state compliance with global environmental commitments.

In 1974, two scientists from the University of California, Molina, M. J., and Rowland, F. S., published a seminal paper in *Nature* stating that the stratospheric ozone layer would be adversely affected by large amounts of artificial emissions released into the atmosphere. They identified chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) as

major contributors to ozone depletion, which leads to increased ultraviolet radiation reaching the Earth's surface. This increase in UV radiation results in serious consequences such as higher incidences of skin cancer and cataracts, immune system dysfunction, reduced agricultural productivity, and ecosystem damage (Molina & Rowland, 1974).

The publication of this article sparked strong public concern in the United States, prompting the National Science Foundation and the Environmental Quality Council to establish a special government project on stratospheric mutations, the Interagency Monitoring of Stratospheric Ozone (IMSO), to study and coordinate related governmental activities. By the mid-1970s, several international organizations had also become involved in the issue of ozone depletion, including the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the European Economic Community (EEC). In May 1981, during its ninth session, the UNEP Council decided to establish an ad hoc working group of legal and technical experts to draft a global convention for the protection of the ozone layer.

In September 1976, a research report released by the National Academy of Sciences supported the theory of ozone depletion and its link to increased cancer incidence (Kaufman, 1977). The report heightened public anxiety, increasing pressure on the government to ban CFCs in aerosol products. Consequently, in March 1978, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency proposed banning the use of CFCs in nonessential aerosol sprays, a ban that came into effect in December of the same year.

At that time, the United States was the world's largest producer of CFCs, followed by the European Community. However, skepticism within the European Community regarding the ozone depletion theory persisted, as many feared that banning CFC production would lead to significant trade losses. As a result, despite the signing of the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer in 1985, international negotiations to reduce CFCs reached a deadlock.

A breakthrough occurred in 1985 when Joseph Farman, Brian Gardiner, and Jon Shanklin published an article in *Nature* revealing severe ozone depletion over the Halley Bay Observatory in Antarctica since the mid-1970s. By the early 1980s, average ozone depletion during October had exceeded 40%. They identified the breakdown products of artificial CFCs as the root cause of this ozone loss (Farman, Gardiner, & Shanklin, 1985). In 1986, researchers from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) confirmed these findings through satellite observations, revealing an ozone hole roughly the size of the United States during the Antarctic spring (Stolarski et al., 1986). Further conclusive evidence was provided by Solomon et al. (1986), who demonstrated that CFCs are the primary pollutants responsible for damaging the ozone layer.

These pivotal studies garnered worldwide attention and led to the signing of the Montreal Protocol in 1987, which had 198 contracting parties as of October 2023. The Montreal Protocol represents a landmark event in international environmental diplomacy.

Ozone-depleting substances have been widely used in industries such as refrigeration, air conditioning, foam production, cleaning, agriculture, and firefighting. The Montreal Protocol requires each contracting party to undertake technological research and transform production lines to phase out ozone-depleting substances. Developed countries are expected to lead industrial transformation efforts and provide technological and financial assistance to developing countries through the Multilateral Fund mechanism. Developing countries and their industries also must invest in research and development to replace ozone-depleting substances.

At the 36th Meeting of the Parties to the Montreal Protocol in October 2024, it was announced that the Protocol has reached a significant milestone by phasing out over 99% of ozone-depleting substances (United Nations Environment Programme, Ozone Secretariat, 2024). This achievement demonstrates humanity's capacity for unity and cooperation when confronting threats to global survival.

The success of the Montreal Protocol also highlights the influence of international organizations' autonomy on countries' compliance with international commitments. While ozone depletion is not a military security issue, it directly affects the interests of all humanity, garnering widespread global support for collective action. The UNEP and related organizations have demonstrated rational, legitimate, ethical, and professional authority in addressing ozone depletion. These international organizations serve as information centers, translating scientific research into international norms, thereby enhancing normative authority. Ultimately, the autonomy of the UNEP and related bodies has been reaffirmed; international organizations are not mere appendages of sovereign states but are expanding their role as significant actors in international affairs.

DISCUSSION

The Montreal Protocol case proves the necessity and importance of international cooperation in the face of global environmental issues, but a more prominent new feature than international cooperation is that the influence of scientific knowledge and professional organizations on global environmental issues cannot be ignored. In the usual sense, the protagonists of international cooperation are sovereign states. However, in the face of increasingly globalized and specialized issues, the discourse power of sovereign states in related issues is being weakened. On the contrary, international organizations have channels to obtain global information, support from diverse international scientific personnel, and knowledge and information are shaping the authority of international organizations. This autonomous force drives international organizations to continuously enhance their ability to lead international issues.

Humanity is a community of development, and perhaps a country can close its doors and not connect with the outside world, but the natural environment has already connected various parts of the world before the birth of humanity. So from the perspective of the natural environment, humans as a community are

innate, and no country or individual can exist independently without the natural environment community provided by the Earth.

The increase in the autonomy and power of international organizations not only makes the international community more complex, but also provides a channel for weak countries to participate in international issues. Of course, it may also increase the ways in which major powers influence weak countries. In any case, the existence of autonomous power in international organizations weakens the influence of sovereign states in the international community. Relatively speaking, it makes the distribution of power in the international community more balanced, and shifts the game between the international community from a simple military power competition to a more diverse direction.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Starting from Robert Keohane's perspective on the issue of a country's compliance with international commitments, the article argues that although reputation is the reason for a country's compliance with international commitments, it is not the main reason. The main reason for a country to comply with international commitments lies in the coercive power of international organizations, which comes from the autonomous power of international organizations. Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore proposed that the rational, legitimate, moral, and professional authority of international organizations are the core of their autonomous power, but attention should not be ignored to the information power of international

organizations. In addition, the scope of application of the autonomy of international organizations is also worth noting, especially the distance between the autonomy of international organizations and national military security. Finally, international organizations have the drive to pursue self-interest, which is the source of strength for organizational survival and development, as well as the basis for the continuation of organizational autonomy and power.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

This article focuses on the acquisition and application of the autonomy of international organizations. There is insufficient research on the limiting factors and power boundaries of the autonomy of international organizations, and the selection of cases is mainly limited to special cases with strong technical and professional expertise. In the future, we hope that more researchers can further study the limiting factors of the autonomy of international organizations, and find more cases to conduct more in-depth research on the autonomy of international organizations themselves and the rules of power operation.

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