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Emotions in International Organisations in the Shadow of a Declining Liberal Order

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Summary

This Forum article explores the role of emotions in international organisations (IOs) in the context of a shifting and contested liberal international order (LIO). It explores how emotions influence decision-making, diplomatic negotiations, legitimacy and policy outcomes in institutions with a focus on the United Nations (UN), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). The introductory piece also introduces a future research agenda on emotions in multilateral diplomacy. We argue that as the post-wwii liberal order comes under increasing strain from geopolitical tensions, wars and global crises, emotions have become increasingly central to multilateral diplomacy and international governance. Yet their role remains under-researched within IOs. Understanding how emotions influence multilateral diplomacy offers new insights into institutional resilience, legitimacy and the dynamics of international co-operation. The Forum suggests that emotions are not peripheral but central to the functioning of IOs. The contributions point to a need for more systematic study of different aspects of emotions within IOs.

Keywords

emotions in International Relations – multilateral diplomacy – international organisations – liberal international order – EU – NATO – UN

1 Introduction

The purpose of this Forum is to explore whether emotions might serve as an explanatory factor in the way international organisations (IOs) operate,¹ make decisions, act in international relations and relate to their audience (i.e. the international community or citizens of its member states).² The research agenda on emotions in International Relations (IR) has grown rapidly,³ and has already demonstrated how emotions shape interpersonal diplomatic relations,⁴ how they are strategically used in inter-state relations,⁵ how they construct or maintain international conflicts or emotional security communities,⁶ and how emotions constrain or enable the foreign policies of international institutions.⁷ The core objective of this Forum is to investigate the role of emotions in the formulation and conduct of multilateral diplomacy, as well as in

¹ There is a vast literature on how IOs work. This Forum suggests that many aspects of the study of IOs, in particular how they work through group dynamics (Laatikainen and Smith 2017), would benefit from the inclusion of emotional aspects in their analysis.

² The domestic audience in foreign policy as well as how states appeal to their domestic audiences while engaging in diplomacy has also been studied (see Kim and Melissen 2022; Zhang 2022). How citizens perceive global challenges and threats to their welfare and livelihoods are also a significant input for decision-makers at both national and EU levels (Manners 2024).

³ While the IR literature on emotions expands very rapidly, some key early research includes Crawford (2000), who set the research agenda on the role of emotions in world politics. Mercer (2005) challenged the traditional dichotomisation of emotions and rationality, and showed that emotion and cognition are closely intertwined (Mercer 2010). Hutchison and Bleiker (2014) and Bleiker and Hutchison (2008) theorised the processes in which individual emotions become collective and political, and further developed the research agenda for studying emotions in IR. More recently, colleagues addressed the methodological challenges of studying emotions in international relations in general (Clément and Sangar 2018) and in terms of discourse in particular (Koschut et al. 2017). For a recent overview of emotions in IR research see Koschut and Ross 2024.

⁴ For example, by demonstrating how not only political leaders' but also large entities' such as nations' political identities are formed by their friends and enemies (Volkan 1985). For a wider discussion on the relationship between emotions, security and diplomacy see Pace and Bilgic 2019.

⁵ Hall 2015.

⁶ Volkan 2001; Koschut 2014.

⁷ Gürkan and Terzi 2024.

framing policy outcomes within IOs. More specifically, the Forum examines how, amid debates about a changing liberal order, the new volatile security context and shifting global, international and regional dynamics influence the emotions felt, displayed or expressed within IOs.

2 Why This Forum?

The liberal international order (LIO) is currently in trouble.⁸ In recent decades, the pillars of the international liberal multilateral order have come under considerable strain. In the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the era of multilateralism and rules-based international order have been challenged by various power centres,⁹ that seek to advance, in their words, a 'multipolar' world as an alternative to the post-WWII international order of multilateralism. In this Forum, we suggest that during these volatile times, emotions play an increasingly important role in researching international institutions for several reasons.

First, we are living through a period of heightened geopolitical tensions and new and emerging security threats, which are also primarily characterised by a growing global attention to insecurity among citizens.¹⁰ Global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, the 2009 financial crisis and the increasing number of major conflicts, including the war in Europe and Gaza, have made international relations emotionally charged. However, we still lack an understanding of how this emotional era affects the legitimacy of IOs, citizens' attachment to them or the conduct of diplomacy in IOs.¹¹ Second, over the past decade, IOs have been challenged from within and without.¹² The rise of autocratic states within traditionally Western-led liberal IOs, the return of

⁸ Ikenberry 2018; Lake, Martin and Risse 2021.

⁹ On how populism and citizens challenge the LIO, see Koch 2024; on how de-colonial justice claims and the resistance to it challenges the normative stance of the LIO, see Lawson and Zarakol 2023. Both challenges to the LIO are significantly charged with emotions.

¹⁰ Kinnvall and Mitzen 2016.

¹¹ Geis, Opits and Pfeiffer 2022. Post-WWII IOs have increasingly been challenged both with regard to the power structures embedded in them and the norms they uphold, leading to contestation of both the authority and legitimacy of these IOs (Zürn 2018) as well as the norms and procedures they uphold (Wiener 2014). The emotional driving points of such contestation is a significant research agenda that is yet to emerge.

¹² Lake, Martin and Risse 2021; Dijkstra et al. 2025; Ikenberry 2018; Lesch, Zimmermann and Deitelhoff 2024.

war to Europe with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the emergence of alternative governance structures challenging the Western-led liberal world order, and the rise of new security threats compel us to study IOs from new perspectives. While these challenges have placed considerable strain on both the conduct of multilateral diplomacy and the functioning of IOs, we suggest that studying emotions can provide a fresh perspective on how the evolving challenges to the LIO are shaping multilateral diplomatic frameworks.

3 Declining Liberal International Order and New Questions on the Research Agenda for 'Emotions in Multilateral Diplomacy'

Against this backdrop, we suggest some key themes and questions, which might form the basis of a future research agenda on emotions in IOs:

- *Emotions among diplomats*: How do emotions circulate among diplomats in multinational diplomatic circles? How do diplomats use emotions in their daily work within IOs?
- *Emotions and inter-state negotiations in IOs*: What is the impact of emotions on consensus-building, decision-shaping and decision-making in IOs? Does the context of geopolitical insecurities increase certain type of emotions in IOs, such as fear or anxiety? If so, does the salience of certain emotions facilitate consensus building?
- *The role of emotions in framing IOs' policy outcomes*: How might various emotions – such as anger, fear or sympathy – frame IOs' policy outcomes and bear an impact on inter-organisational relations?
- *Emotions and IOs' self-narrative*: To what extent do emotions play a role in IOs' self-narrative, the construction of institutional identity and/or their legitimisation strategies? How far are the emotions expressed by the IOs shared by their member states?
- *Emotions and the changing geopolitical security context*: How do new and emerging security threats – such as hybrid warfare, the battle of narratives and foreign interference – interact with emotions within IOs? How does the shift from co-operation and integration to geopolitical rivalry and friction impact 'emotional obligations', 'emotional entitlements' or 'hierarchies of emotional deference'?¹³ In an increasingly volatile geopolitical context, are there some issues that are becoming more 'emotional' in IOs?

¹³ Gustafsson and Hall 2021.

- *Citizens and Ios*: How do citizens feel about Ios and the diplomatic efforts undertaken by them? Do citizens' emotions impact critical policy decisions, such as coercive diplomacy measures like the adoption of sanctions or decisions to accept new members, as in the case of the enlargement of the European Union (EU) or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)?

4 The Structure of This Forum

In this Forum, we answer some of these questions. The contributions to the Forum are concise reflections, intended to provide a brief overview of the different ways emotions might be studied in multilateral diplomacy in the face of growing dissensus over the LIO. They exclusively focus on core multilateral Ios established after WWII which encounter various challenges in the current international context: the EU, NATO and the United Nations (UN).

The first set of articles focuses on Ios' self-narrative and (strategic) use of emotions in times of crisis. Anne Marie-Houde highlights the link between legitimacy and emotions. She discusses how emotions might undermine or enhance citizens' attachment to Ios, namely NATO and the EU, and how these two organisations strategically mobilise emotions in multilateral diplomacy to enhance their legitimacy. In the same vein, Blanc addresses the strategic use of 'hope' in the UN's global discourse after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and discusses the limitations and risks of mobilising hope in multilateral settings. Baciu, drawing on NATO's narrative after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, argues that emotions expressed by Ios in challenging times serve to create trust among members, deter dangers and produce ontological security. In the second part of the Forum, the article by Cutto and Devlen opens the 'black box' of negotiations in multilateral fora. Cutto and Devlen analyse how emotional dynamics in populist leaders' discourses in Ios hinder consensus-building initiatives during the General Debate of the United Nations Assembly. Finally, Sanchez Salgado addresses a persistent problem in Ios: gender inequality and power dynamics. She suggests studying gender issues in EU foreign policy from an emotional angle to better grasp structural issues related to gender inequality in EU foreign policy. A topic that becomes increasingly important in volatile times, as recent research indicates that women leaders often demonstrate superior performance compared to men in crisis situations.¹⁴

¹⁴ For emerging literature on the role of gender in diplomacy and in foreign ministries see the special issue of *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* edited by Niklasson and Towns (2022). See also Bruce et al. 2022 in Sanchez Salgado in this Forum.

With these contributions, we don't claim to offer a comprehensive research agenda on emotions in IOs during a time of extreme challenges to the LIO. Instead, we present some questions as an initial point of departure – meant to be developed further through collective scholarly engagement – to deepen our understanding of emotions within multilateral frameworks in an increasingly emotional era marked by internal and external challenges to IOs.

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