When are International Organizations Responsive to Policy Problems?

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When are international organizations (IOs) responsive to the policy problems that motivated their establishment? While it is a conventional assumption that IOs exist to address transnational challenges, the question of whether and when IO policy-making is responsive to shifts in underlying problems has not been systematically explored. This study investigates the responsiveness of IOs from a large-*n*, comparative approach. Theoretically, we develop three alternative models of IO responsiveness, emphasizing severeness, dependence, and power differentials. Empirically, we focus on the domain of security, examining the responsiveness of eight multi-issue IOs to armed conflict between 1980 and 2015, using a novel and expansive dataset on IO policy decisions. Our findings suggest, first, that IOs are responsive to security problems and, second, that responsiveness is not primarily driven by dependence or power differentials but by problem severity. An in-depth study of the responsiveness of the UN Security Council using more granular data confirms these findings. As the first comparative study of whether and when IO policy adapts to problem severity, the article has implications for debates about IO responsiveness, performance, and legitimacy.

¿Cuándo reaccionan las organizaciones internacionales (OOII) a los problemas políticos que motivaron su establecimiento? Aunque convencionalmente se asume que las OOII existen para abordar los desafíos transnacionales, el hecho es que no se ha explorado de manera sistemática la cuestión de si, y cuándo, la formulación de políticas de las OOII responde a los cambios en los problemas subyacentes. Este estudio investiga la reactividad de las OOII desde un enfoque comparativo de gran n. De manera teórica, desarrollamos tres modelos alternativos de reactividad por parte de las OOII, enfatizando la gravedad, la dependencia y los diferenciales de poder. De manera empírica, nos centramos en el campo de la seguridad, examinando la reactividad a los conflictos armados entre 1980 y 2015 de ocho OOII relacionadas con múltiples campos, a través de la utilización de un conjunto de datos novedoso y expansivo sobre las decisiones políticas de las OOII. Nuestras conclusiones sugieren, en primer lugar, que las OOII reaccionan a los problemas de seguridad y, en segundo lugar, que la reactividad no está impulsada principalmente ni por la dependencia ni por las diferencias de poder, sino por la gravedad del problema. Un estudio en profundidad de la reactividad del Consejo de Seguridad de la ONU que utiliza datos más desglosados confirma estas conclusiones. El artículo, al ser el primer estudio comparativo que analiza si, y cuándo, la política de la OOII se adapta a la gravedad del problema, tiene implicaciones para los debates sobre la reactividad, el desempeño y la legitimidad de las OOII.

Quand les organisations internationales (OI) réagissent-elles aux problématiques politiques qui ont motivé leur fondation? Bien qu'il soit généralement admis que les OI existent pour répondre à des défis transnationaux, la réaction des politiques des OI aux évolutions de problèmes sous-jacents n'a pas fait l'objet d'une analyse systématique. Cette étude analyse la réactivité des OI selon une approche comparative ≪grand-N≫. Sur le plan théorique, nous élaborons trois modèles alternatifs de réac-

tivité des OI pour mettre en évidence la gravité, la dépendance et les différentiels de pouvoir. D'un point de vue empirique, nous nous focalisons sur le domaine de la sécurité et examinons la réactivité de huit OI aux actions multiples à l'égard de conflits armés entre 1980 et 2015, à l'aide d'un nouvel et riche ensemble de données sur les décisions politiques des OI. Nos conclusions indiquent d'abord que les OI réagissent aux problématiques sécuritaires, puis que leur réactivité est davantage influencée par la gravité d'un problème que par la dépendance ou les différentiels de pouvoir. Une étude approfondie de la réactivité du Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU à l'aide d'autres données granulaires vient confirmer ces résultats. Première étude comparative de l'adaptation des politiques des OI à la gravité d'un problème, l'article s'accompagne d'implications pour les débats sur la réactivité, les performances et la légitimité des OI.

When are international organizations (IOs) responsive to the policy problems that motivated their establishment and empowerment? While it is a foundational assumption in international relations scholarship that IOs exist to address transnational challenges confronting states and societies, systematic research on whether and when IO policy-making actually is sensitive to the severity of problems is curiously absent.

On the one hand, research in the rational functionalist tradition has produced increasingly refined analyses of IOs as efficient responses to cooperation problems confronting states. Building on Keohane (1984), studies have examined how the varying nature of cooperation problems calls for different functional responses on the part of IOs (Snidal 1985; Rittberger and Zürn 1990; Martin 1992) and systematically shapes the design of IOs (Abbott and Snidal 2000; Koremenos et al. 2001, 2016; Tallberg et al. 2014). However, the question of whether and when IO policy-making actually responds to the problems that create a demand for cooperation has been bracketed.

On the other hand, a large literature has explored the effectiveness and performance of IOs, addressing what happens after the establishment and design of IOs. Research on international regime effectiveness has examined what makes IOs more or less likely to have an impact on policy problems (Miles et al. 2002; Underdal and Young 2004; Young 2011). Related, a growing literature has examined the factors that make some IOs perform better than others, conceiving of performance as both process and outcome (Gutner and Thompson 2010; Tallberg et al. 2016; Lall 2023). Yet, so far, this literature, too, has refrained from engaging systematically with the question of IO responsiveness to policy problems.

The exceptions to this pattern are a number of studies on the reaction speed of IOs in times of crisis (Hardt 2014; Agné 2016; Lundgren et al. 2020) and on the responsiveness of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) specifically (Beardsley and Schmidt 2012; Benson and Gizelis 2019; Allen and Yuen 2020; Binder and Golub 2020; Lundgren and Klamberg 2022). These studies offer important contributions in their respective areas, but do not formulate and test general expectations about the conditions shaping the responsiveness of IOs.

This article targets this gap in our understanding of international cooperation. It makes three central contributions. To begin with, it represents the first systematic effort to examine the responsiveness of IOs to policy problems. We conceptualize responsiveness as the sensitivity of IO policy-making to changes in problem severity, understood as the scale of the challenges facing an IO within a given policy field. Establishing whether and when IO policy-making is responsive to problem severity is crucial. Unless IOs are alert to changes in problem severity and develop policy to address those concerns, they cannot be effective in meeting their objectives. While solving problems such as conflict, poverty, and climate change will require more than policy decisions, being sensitive to changes in these problems is a first and necessary requirement for IOs to make a difference in world politics.

Second, on the theoretical side, this article develops three models of IO responsiveness. All are informed by a rationalist understanding of IOs as means for states to overcome collective problems, and all expect IOs to be responsive to changes in the severity of those problems. However, they make different predictions about the conditions shaping how problem severity matters for IO policy-making. The *severeness model* expects that IOs are responsive to the seriousness of a problem in the membership as a whole, regardless of the states afflicted. The *dependence model* suggests that IOs are more responsive to shifts in problems that afflict member states on which the membership is more dependent. Finally, the *power model* predicts that IOs are more responsive to changes in problems that affect the most powerful member states.

Third, on the empirical side, the article tests these three models using novel and unique data on IO policy-making. We examine responsiveness in the context of eight multi-issue IOs over the time period 1980–2015. Our focus is responsiveness in the domain of security, where we operationalize problem severity based on armed conflict. The security domain is central to many multi-issue IOs, has clear implications for human well-being, and offers methodological advantages, making it a suitable starting point for the evaluation of IO responsiveness. We measure responsiveness of IO policy-making based on the sensitivity of the IO's policy output to fluctuations in the overall level of conflict involving its member states. In an extension, we investigate granular data on the UN Security Council, allowing us to gauge IO responsiveness to specific conflicts.

Our findings show that IOs, indeed, are responsive to changes in security problems and offer evidence on the conditions shaping such responsiveness. When the rate of armed conflict shifts in the membership of an IO, such changes in problem severity lead to predictable shifts in policy output aimed at reducing conflict. The severeness model, expecting IOs to be sensitive to the seriousness of a problem in the membership as a whole, provides the best overall fit with the data. Models predicting IOs to be particularly responsive to problems experienced by important trading partners or more powerful member states fit the data less well. Our deeper examination of the UN Security Council corroborates the general pattern, establishing that armed conflicts that are more severe are more likely to result in a Security Council resolution. Taken together, these findings suggest, first, that the IOs in our sample are responsive to security problems and, second, that their responsiveness primarily is conditioned by the severeness of the problems themselves rather than patterns of dependence or power.

Our findings have four broader implications, further discussed in the conclusion. First, they open up a new research agenda on the policy responsiveness of IOs. While this article has explored responsiveness in the security domain, our approach may be expanded to evaluate whether IO responsiveness in other policy areas is subject to the same conditions. Second, the responsiveness of IOs to policy problems indicates that IOs meet a first necessary condition for effectiveness. Third, the conditions under which IOs are responsive suggest that these organizations are truer to their organizational mandates and less driven by special interests than is often assumed. Fourth, the policy responsiveness on the part of IOs likely has positive implications for the perceived legitimacy of these organizations.

IO Responsiveness to Problems: Three Models

We conceptualize IO responsiveness as the sensitivity of an IO's policy-making to a shift in the severity of a policy problem within a given period of time. This conceptualization has three components. The first part is the changing severity of the problem that the IO is set to mitigate. For security IOs, it could be the eruption of armed conflict; for economic IOs, a rise in trade barriers; and for humanitarian IOs, a growing food crisis. The second part is the policy response on the part of the IO. It consists of the IO adopting new policy aimed at addressing the problem, for instance, decisions to send peacekeepers, harmonize product standards, or sponsor aid delivery. The third part is the element of time. Being responsive involves reacting to a shifting policy problem within a given period of time. Taking these three components together, an IO shows greater responsiveness when a change in problem severity leads it to prioritize policy decisions in the concerned policy domain within a meaningful time range.

In the following, we present three alternative models of IO responsiveness. These models share an origin in a rationalist understanding of IOs as means for states to overcome collective problems (Keohane 1984; Martin and Simmons 2012; Koremenos 2016; Voeten 2019). In this understanding, IOs are functional responses that allow states to coordinate their actions in dealing with problems that afflict them as a collective. As such, IOs are expected to be sensitive to changes in the severity of the problems that motivated their establishment. When IOs develop new policy, key parameters shaping decision-making are the actors involved, their preferences, and the institutional context (Lake and Powell 1999; Martin and Simmons 2012; Sommerer et al. 2022).

Where our three models part ways are in the conditions shaping how problem severity matters for IO policy development. While all three models expect IOs to be responsive, they make different predictions about the actors whose problems IOs care most about. The first model emphasizes the severity of the problem for the membership as a whole, the second model the severity of the problem for those member states on which the membership is most dependent, and the third model the severity of the problem for the most powerful member states of the IO.

The *severeness model* suggests that it is the overall seriousness of problems confronting an IO's membership, irrespective of the states afflicted, which determines the policy response of the organization. This model thus does not differentiate between states in terms of whose problems matter most for the responsiveness of IOs. Instead, it assumes that IOs are most concerned by the scale of the overall problem confronting the membership.

The assumption that all states' problems would be of equal concern to IOs has some support in theory, law, and

empirics. Theoretically, it is implicit in rational functionalist arguments, which conceive of states as like units involved in efforts to solve collective action problems that affect them all (Keohane 1984). Legally, it is expressed in the principle of sovereign equality, which gives states equal status in the founding and governing of IOs. Empirically, it is supported by data on formal decision power, which is shared equally in the large majority of IOs (Blake and Payton 2015), and on negotiated outcomes in IOs, which often are surprisingly balanced across member states (e.g., Arregui and Thomson 2009).

Beardsley and Schmidt (2012), in one of few existing contributions on IO responsiveness, refer to this logic as the "organizational mission" model, since it focuses on the overall severeness of the general problem an IO has been established to address. Examining UN involvement in international crises, they find that the resources this organization devotes to different conflicts primarily reflect the degree to which a conflict poses a challenge to the UN's organizational mandate of promoting international peace and stability. This logic is consistent with the observation that IOs often spend considerable effort on reducing problems that afflict member states, which neither are economically central nor politically powerful, but whose problems are central to the mission of the IO. Contemporary examples include UN peacekeeping missions in Kosovo, Mali, and South Sudan; IMF lending programs in Argentina, Ecuador, and Pakistan; and UNHCR support operations in Afghanistan, Jordan, and Ukraine.

H1: *IOs will be responsive to shifts in the overall severity of policy problems in the membership of the organization, irrespective of the member states concerned.*

The *dependence model* suggests that IO responsiveness is shaped by patterns of dependence among states. In this model, IOs are more likely to respond to a shift in problem severity if it occurs in a member state on which the membership as a whole is more dependent.

This model builds on the assumption that states are varyingly dependent on each other in world politics (Keohane and Nye 2001; Farrell and Newman 2019). If dependencies had been perfectly symmetric, then this model would have led to the same prediction as the severeness model. Yet states are typically unequally dependent on one another. For instance, some states have larger home markets and are therefore less dependent on exports than states with smaller home markets. Some states are located downstream and are therefore more easily affected by pollution from upstream states than vice versa. Some states have no contiguous enemies and more topographic protection, making them less reliant on mutual security guarantees than states with several contiguous enemies and little natural protection.

These asymmetric dependencies matter for IO responses to changing problem severity, according to this model. When a state is more dependent on another member country, it has stronger incentives to find collective solutions to problems afflicting that country and the negative externalities that flow from them. For instance, states that are more dependent on trade with another country have a particular interest in IO policy responses aimed at mitigating deteriorating economic conditions in that country. States that are more easily affected by pollution from another country have especially strong incentives to support IO policy targeting emissions in that country. And states adversely affected by armed intra-state conflict in neighboring countries have unusually strong incentives to support international action to mitigate or stop the fighting. When IOs con-

front the choice of which problems to prioritize, it therefore matters whether the membership as a whole is more or less dependent on the country experiencing the problem. A membership that is more dependent on the problem country will have stronger incentives to solve its difficulties. For example, when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, the UN's robust response—including both military and economic sanctions—was made more likely by Kuwait's status as a major oil exporter upon which many other states depended.

H2: *IOs will be more responsive when shifts in the severity of policy problems afflict member states on which the membership is more dependent.*

The *power model* suggests that IO responsiveness is conditioned by the power of the member states experiencing a problem. Problems that afflict more powerful states will be viewed as more important by the IO and be met with a more comprehensive policy response.

This model builds on the premise that states in IO memberships are varyingly powerful and that these differences in power have implications for the problems that receive attention. It draws on distributive rationalist scholarship that emphasizes how IOs are structured to serve the interests of more powerful states (Voeten 2019). In this vein, Gruber (2000) submits that stronger states set the conditions for cooperation, while Drezner (2008) claims that the great powers remain in charge of the rules of the global economy, and Stone (2011) argues that informal power allows the leading states to exert control over IOs even when formal power is equally distributed. Similar arguments have been advanced by political economists, who argue that more powerful states use IOs as vehicles to advance their special interests (Vreeland and Dreher 2014).

This model extends general arguments about the role of power in international cooperation to the problems that gain attention in IO policy-making. It suggests that power asymmetries will be reflected in the responsiveness of IOs. When more powerful member states experience a particular problem, they will use their influence within IOs to shape the policy agenda, such that their problem is prioritized above others. One example is the reorientation toward counter-terrorism policy in many IOs following the terrorist attacks on the US on September 11, 2001 (cf. Howard and Stark 2018).

H3: *IOs will be more responsive when shifts in the severity of policy problems afflict the most powerful member states.*

Research Design

To examine our hypotheses, we construct alternative statistical models of IO decision-making, each emphasizing one of the three features theorized to shape IO responsiveness. We then pit these models of hypothetical IO prioritization processes against each other, assessing their relative ability to approximate the underlying data-generating process. In the following, we describe the steps we have taken to make this approach work: Identifying a sample of multi-issue IOs; collecting data on IO policy output; conceptualizing and measuring problem severity; and adjusting for heterogeneity across IOs.

Sample of Multi-Issue IOs

We study a sample of eight IOs (table 1), selected on four grounds. First, all eight IOs are multi-issue organiza-

tions with extensive policy agendas. Multi-issue IOs have numerous concerns at any given time, requiring them to make choices about what deserves space on the agenda. This makes them a suitable testing ground for examining whether and when their attention is influenced by shifts in problem severity. Second, all IOs in our sample have policy portfolios that encompass "foreign policy" and "military cooperation," indicating that security falls within their policy remit. We also control for variation in mandates in our analysis. Third, the sample has a wide geographic scope, including organizations from all regions of the world, and it is balanced with the wider population of IOs on core features of membership and institutional design.[1] Fourth, the sample includes IOs that exhibit longitudinal variation in problem severity (see figure 1) while presenting diverse profiles with regard to the explanatory models, providing a suitable empirical basis for examining IO responsiveness.

While our approach is in principle applicable to any policy domain, we focus here on the security domain because it presents suitable characteristics for a first comparative test of the conditions that shape IO responsiveness. To begin with, not only do many multi-issue IOs owe their existence to security concerns, in that they were established to deliver on a desire for greater peace and stability, but peace and conflict remain a central task for many IOs (Tavares 2009). They thus meet a baseline criterion of possible responsiveness. Next, security presents methodological advantages for evaluating responsiveness in terms of policy output. Compared with issue areas where problems often accumulate more slowly, such as in trade or the environment, we can make stronger assumptions about the lag time between problem emergence and policy response. Finally, focusing on security gives us the opportunity to examine responsiveness comparatively in a setting where existing studies exclusively focus on the UN (Gilligan and Stedman 2003; Fortna 2008; Beardsley and Schmidt 2012; Stojek and Tir 2015; Benson and Gizelis 2019; Allen and Yuen 2020; Lundgren et al. 2020). It thus allows us to assess whether the pioneering findings identified in the UN context can be extended to IOs generally, or whether the UN is specific in this respect.

By design, our sample excludes task-specific IOs for which security is the primary or only policy area, such as NATO. While we expect such IOs to be involved in the global response to armed conflict, they provide a less compelling empirical basis for the evaluation of rival perspectives on IO responsiveness. Compared with multi-issue IOs, where many issues compete for scarce attention and agendas are susceptible to the political influences flowing from dependence and power, task-specific IOs have agendas that are narrower and less likely to fluctuate over time.[2]

Security Policy Output

We identified the security policy output of the IOs in our sample based on a novel and unique dataset (Lundgren et al. 2023). We gathered intergovernmental policy decisions

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[1] The mean number of member states in our sample is 28.7, identical to the COW-IGO population mean (Pevehouse et al. 2020). The IOs in our data have a mean delegation score of 0.21 compared with 0.16 for the 29 multi-issue IOs included in the Measuring International Authority (MIA) dataset (Hooghe et al. 2017), and a mean pooling score of 0.23 against 0.21 in the MIA data.

[2] Our sample includes the UN Security Council, which could conceivably be considered a task-specific IO body within a wider, multi-issue IO. We include the Security Council because it is a principal decision-making body of the UN, and replacing it with the General Assembly in a security-oriented test would have biased the results. However, in our robustness tests we present results both with and without the Security Council.

Table 1. IOs in sample

IO	Decision-making body	Region
Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)	Ministerial meetings	Asia-Pacific
African Union (AU)	Assembly of the AU	Africa
European Union (EU)	Council of the EU	Europe
Organization of American States (OAS)	General Assembly	Americas
Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)	Ministerial councils	Africa/Asia-Pacific/Europe
South African Development Community (SADC)	Summit of Heads of States	Africa
Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)	Council of Heads of State	Asia-Pacific
United Nations (UN)	Security Council	Global

adopted by each IO's principal decision-making body between 1980 and 2015 (table 1).[3] We focused on these bodies because they hold considerable authority and often set the overall agenda for other IO bodies. In comparison, policy acts by lower-level preparatory bodies or IO bureaucracies are less suitable indicators for an IO's overall responsiveness to problem severity. We assume that preparatory policy products generated at lower levels of the IOs are channeled into decisions by the main decision-making body. This approach also eliminates the risk of double-counting decisions, which could occur if the main body and preparatory bodies publish drafts of the same policy.

We capture all types of decisions adopted by these decision-making bodies, such as resolutions, declarations, decisions, and directives.[4] The full data cover some 35,000 documents. Based on manual content analysis, we assigned IO output to the security policy field if its content related to at least one of eight security policy sub-codes, such as "intrastate violence and conflict," "mediation and arbitration," or "terrorism" (table A1 in the online appendix). In our robustness tests, we evaluate responsiveness based on more restrictive and extensive sub-code lists.

The dependent variable in our analysis is the count of security policy output for a given year and IO. For IOs that are responsive, shifts in problem severity should translate into corresponding shifts in policy output. Concretely, an increase in security problems should correspond to an increase in the volume of security policy, adjusting for time lags. Viewing policy responsiveness as a function of the volume of relevant policy output follows in the tradition of quantitative and comparative studies of legislative production at the domestic level (Binder 1999; Roller 2005) and at the EU level (Leuffen and Hertz 2010). It is also consistent with the comparative policy agenda literature, where institutional responsiveness is typically viewed as a function of the degree to which policy agendas adapt to a changing environment (Baumgartner and Jones 2005; Alexandrova et al. 2016).

Responsiveness can be measured in both general terms, focusing on the correlation between the overall level of conflict among IO members and the aggregate volume of security policy, and in specific terms, where individual policy outputs are linked to specific conflicts. A key strength in measuring responsiveness in general terms, as we do in the first part of our analysis, is that an IO's aggregated annual policy output incorporates policy formulated in response not only to *specific conflicts* but to the *broader problem of conflict*. When an IO responds to conflict, its policy response may not only include targeted interventions, such as the deployment of an observer force, but also general, thematic policy measures that go beyond the specific conflict at hand, such as the establishment of a peacebuilding fund or the institutionalization of a peacekeeping capability. In the second part of our analysis, we investigate IO policy output in specific terms, relying on the more granular data available for the UN Security Council. This allows us to pinpoint the IO's response to specific conflicts. By combining these two methods, we can evaluate the predictive accuracy of our theoretical models for two different facets of responsiveness.
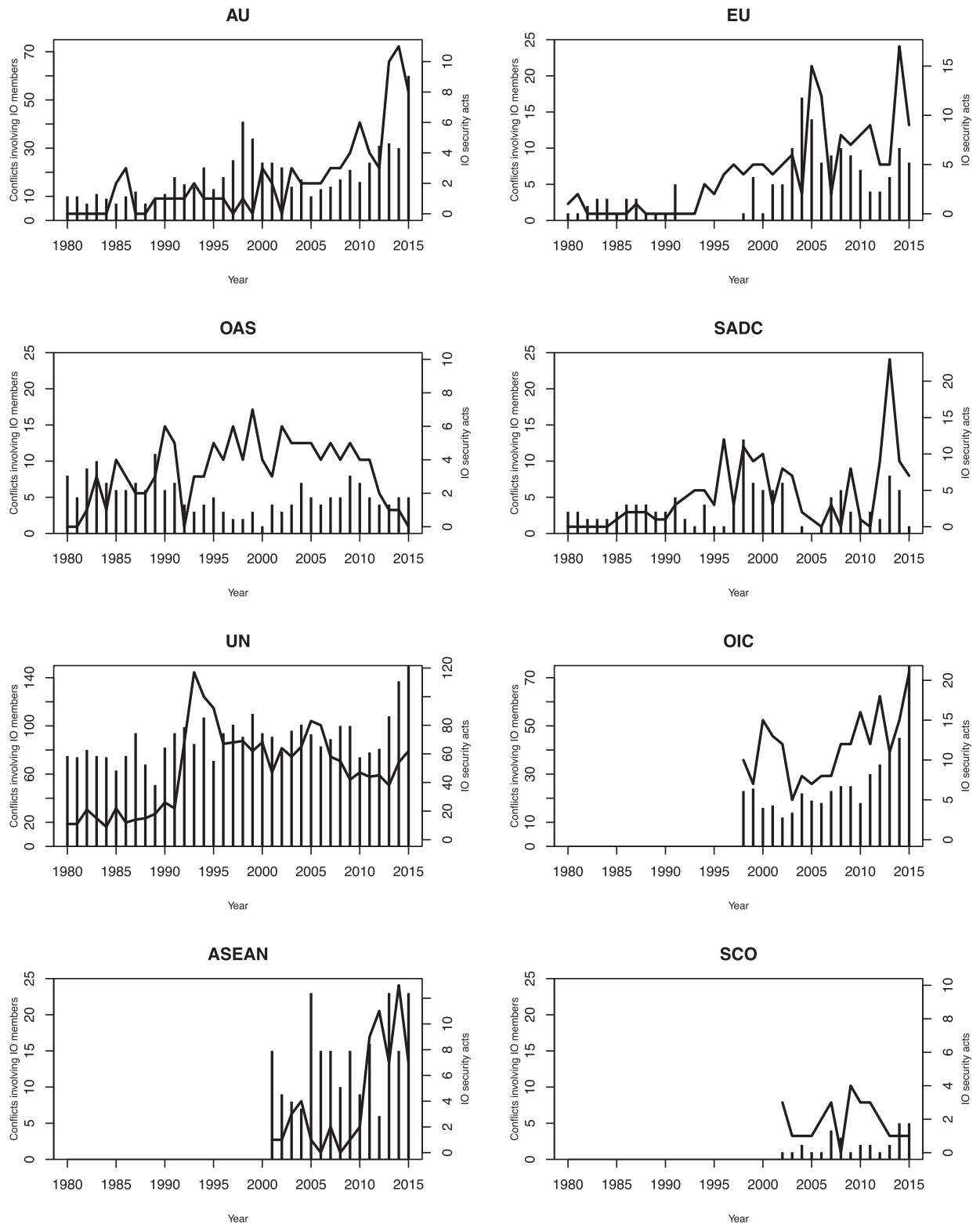
Security Problem Severity

Our key explanatory variable is security problem severity, or the scale of security issues within an IO's membership that call out for a potential response. We measure it as the aggregated and weighted prevalence of armed conflict involving an IO's member states. Armed conflict is the archetypical security problem, generating significant costs for the conflict parties (Gleditsch et al. 2002) and non-participants, including conflict spillover, destabilizing refugee flows, and curtailment of exports (Collier and Hoeffler 1998; Salehyan 2008; Glick and Taylor 2010). Usefully for our purposes, the propensity of armed conflict also varies across different geographic regions (see figure A1 in the online appendix).

We use data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) and follow its definition of armed conflict as a "contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year." We include both inter- and intra-state conflicts. For each IO member state and year, we count their involvement in armed conflict, weight it in accordance with each of the theoretical models (see below), and aggregate across IO memberships to attain a total score at the IO-year level.

Conflicts count toward the yearly IO total if any of its members are involved as a party. In most cases, this means that the conflict takes place within the IO's geographic area. For example, the conflicts in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2011 count toward the African Union's total for that year. In reflection of our theoretical expectation that IOs are responsive to problems affecting their member states, we also include the (rarer) cases where an IO member is listed as a conflict party in a different region. For example, a conflict in Afghanistan where Germany is listed as an involved actor counts toward the EU yearly total, even if this conflict occurs outside of the IO's geographic area. This is reasonable in light of our theory of how membership concerns feed into the wider decision-making machinery of an IO. In our robustness checks, we evaluate an

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[3]For the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), our data cover 2002–2015.

[4]Where data were not available electronically, we contacted secretariats, repository libraries, and secondary sources to complete the information.

Figure 1. Problem severity and security policy output, by IO and year.
Note: Annual count of armed conflicts illustrated with vertical bars; annual security policy output illustrated with lines.

alternative specification of this variable, in which we only include conflicts that occur within an IO's geographic area.

Figure 1 illustrates the over time variation in security problem severity for each of the eight IOs in the sample, to-gether with data on security policy output. We observe considerable variation across organizations on both measures, a natural reflection of differences in membership size and propensity to violence across regions of the world. What

is of key interest for us, however, is longitudinal variation and whether patterns of conflict are met with corresponding patterns of policy output within each IO. While these unweighted data do not suggest a consistent pattern, we observe indications of correspondence for several IOs, including the AU, EU, SADC, OIC, and ASEAN, and, if we focus on shorter periods, for the OAS and UN.

Weighting Security Problem Severity to Reflect Models of IO Responsiveness

To capture how policy-making may be influenced by security problem severity, we use weighting to construct three measures of problem severity, each reflecting one of our theorized models of IO responsiveness: severeness, dependence, and power.

The *severeness* model, emphasizing the overall seriousness of a problem for the membership as a whole, measures problem severity as the raw, unweighted cumulative count of armed conflicts involving IO members each year. Giving all conflicts equal weight, this corresponds to an expectation that IOs view armed conflicts as equally worthy of attention regardless of which member states they involve. For example, if four of an IO's member states are involved in armed conflicts in a given year, the problem severity variable in the severeness model for that IO-year would have a value of four. In other words, the unweighted data shown in figure 1 correspond to the severeness model's measure of severity.

In contrast to the severeness model, the other two models apply different weighting factors to the raw count of armed conflicts. These are applied at the country level, before aggregation to the IO level takes place.[5]

The *dependence* model weights the raw count of armed conflicts involving IO members based on the trade connections between the member states involved in conflict and the other IO members. We view trade dependence as a general measure of member states' interconnectedness, shaping the importance they attach to conflicts involving different members. The weighting factor is calculated as the proportion of IO members' trade with the affected state to the sum of all trade among the IO's members in the year of observation, using Correlates of War data (Barbieri and Keshk 2012; extended through 2015). The weighting implies that a conflict involving a state that is an important trading partner for many IO members would be emphasized over one involving a country with which other members have little or no trade. For example, in the EU, a conflict involving the United Kingdom (such as the 1982 Falklands War) receives a higher weighting than a conflict involving Denmark because the former was a more important trading partner for the bloc's members.[6]

The *power* model weights the raw count of armed conflicts based on the involved member states' power relative to the total power of the IO's membership. We measure power based on national material capabilities (CINC), a conventional proxy index that factors in economic size, population, energy production, and military expenditure (Singer 1988). This weighting means that problems involving members holding a higher proportion of the total material capabilities of the IO membership will count more than problems involving other members. For example, when measuring the problem severity experienced by the OAS, a conflict

involving the United States, the dominant member state of this IO, weighs significantly more than a conflict involving Belize, which has but a fraction of the material capabilities available to the United States.

Figure 2 illustrates the different measures. Using the example of the UN, it traces the volume of armed conflict in the membership over time, weighted in accordance with the severeness, dependence, and power models. For purposes of comparability, the variables have been rescaled to fall between 0 and 1. As we can see, the different weightings provide different "lenses" through which different hypothetical UNs would view the world. We observe that the dependence- and power-weighted measures deviate from the unweighted severeness measure. The dependence-weighted measure, for example, is lower than the unweighted severeness measure until around the year 2000, but higher at several points thereafter. This likely reflects the upward shift in the participation rate of richer economies in armed conflict following the 9/11 attacks, when many such countries joined US-led coalitions to fight in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other locations. If the dependence-based view of IO responsiveness is correct, then we would expect this shift to translate into a surge of the UN's security-related policy output after around the year 2000. By comparison, the power-weighted measure traces the severeness measure fairly closely in the early 1990s and mid-2000s, but exhibits a downward deviation in the 1980s and an upward deviation in the late 1990s. This suggests that during these periods, conflicts involved comparatively less powerful and more powerful UN member states, respectively. If IO responsiveness is primarily a function of power, then we would expect to observe less security-related output during the 1980s and a surge in the mid- to late 1990s, considerably earlier than predicted by the dependence-based measure. If IOs respond primarily to problem severity, regardless of other country characteristics, then we would expect the UN's security output to track the severeness measure, which follows a slowly increasing and less variant trend.

Control Variables

To account for possible confounding factors, we include IO-fixed effects and a range of control variables. The IO-fixed effects allow us to adjust for time-invariant unobserved heterogeneity across IO memberships, such as variation arising from differences in the member states' general propensity of conflict onset, overall wealth, and institutional particularities.

Beyond the fixed effects, we control for time-varying observable factors relating to actors, preferences, and institutional features (see tables A2 and A3 in the online appendix for descriptive statistics). First, we control for IO membership size. In any decision-making process, a higher number of actors may lead to increased transaction costs, informational multiplicity, and more veto players (Tsebelis 2002). At the same time, a higher number of actors may bring about greater opportunities to delegate policy preparation to smaller groups and to share the costs of policy implementation. To account for the effects of membership size, regardless of its net direction, we include the variable *Membership size*, operationalized as the number of IO members in the year of observation (Pevehouse et al. 2020).

Second, recognizing that IOs may experience greater difficulties to reach agreement on policy if members hold divergent political views, we include the variable *preference heterogeneity*, operationalized as the standard deviation of member states' ideal points in the UN General Assembly (Bailey

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[5] Section A1 in the online appendix provides an illustration of the different weightings.

[6] We note that the European Community responded to the Falklands War by repeated condemnation and by imposing an arms embargo on Argentina, all represented in its policy output. See *Bulletin of the European Communities, No. 4, 1982*.
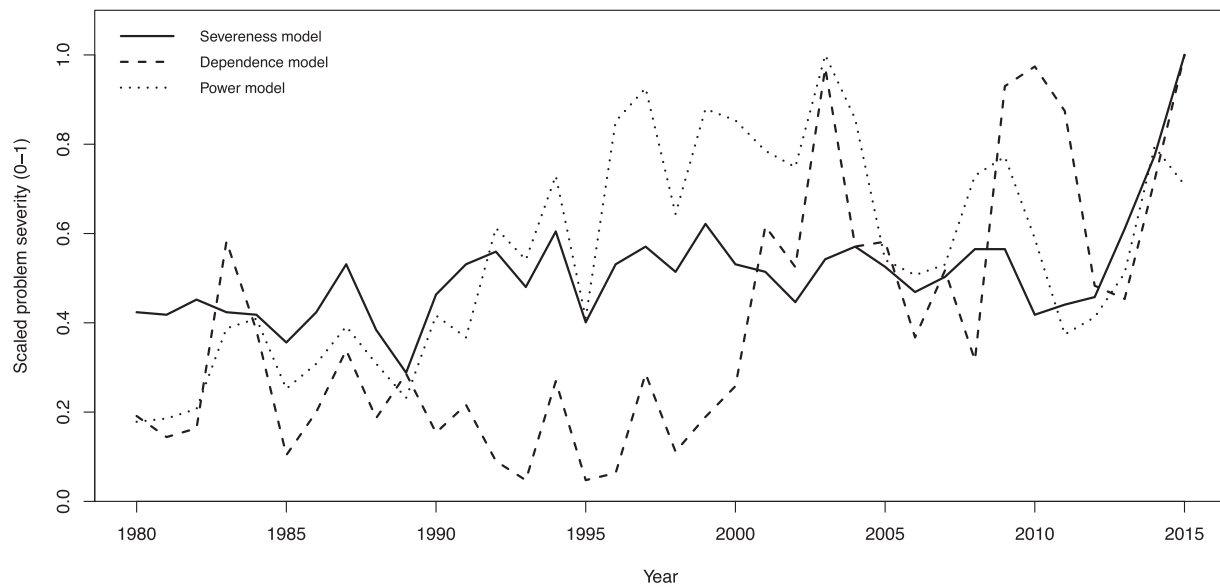
Figure 2. Security problem severity by weighting model, calculated for the UN.

et al. 2017). Higher values on this variable indicate greater political divergence in an IO's membership. Since democratic states have a greater propensity to respond to armed conflict abroad (cf. Lebovic 2004), we also control for the *democratic density* of an IO, calculated as the proportion of member states that classify as democratic regimes in the year of observation, calculated based on data from Cheibub et al. (2010).

Third, we control for some time-varying institutional features. Scholarship has demonstrated that decision-making in IOs is shaped by decision rules (Golub 2008), the scope of supranational authority (Hawkins et al. 2006), and whether or not transnational actors are involved in the policy-making process (Tallberg et al. 2014). We control for the impact of such features by including the variable *pooling*, sourced from the MIA dataset, and measuring the degree to which IOs employ majoritarian decision rules (Hooghe et al. 2017). We also include the variable *delegation,* which is an aggregate annual measure of the allocation of authoritative competences to non-state bodies in an IO's decision-making process, also based on the MIA dataset. We measure *access* for transnational actors based on data on the depth and range of formal access to an IO's bodies collected from Tallberg et al. (2014). Finally, it is also likely that an IO's willingness and ability to respond to problems are affected by the scope of its resources. IOs with expansive and well-trained staff would be more likely to have prepared action plans, standing routines, and in-house expertise, awarding them a higher readiness to respond to armed conflict (Karreth and Tir 2013; Lundgren 2016; Gray 2018). To gauge IO resources, we include the variable *IO staff*, measured based on data presented in Sommerer et al. (2022).

In recognition that these IOs have mandates varyingly focused on security and that mandates vary over time, we control for *security mandate*. Using MIA data on policy scope (Hooghe et al. 2017), the variable is calculated as an additive index, awarding higher scores to IOs whose responsibilities cover foreign policy, military cooperation, and human rights. For each of these policy areas, an IO is awarded 2 points if the policy area is prominent (what MIA labels

"core") and 1 point if it is part of the IO's policy portfolio but non-core ("flanking"). In total, the index ranges between 0 and 6.

The resulting panel data cover eight IOs over 36 years. Since some IOs were established after the start of the study period, the theoretical maximum number of observations is 227. Due to the creation of temporal lags and first differencing, the actual number of observations is somewhat lower in the main models.

Results

Table 2 reports coefficients and robust standard errors clustered on IOs.[7] All models include fixed effects for IOs and years. Corresponding to the severeness model, Model 1 uses the unweighted measure of problem severity; Model 2 weights severity by trade dependence; and Model 3 weights it by power. Given that the three different weightings of problem severity are functions of the same data, we prefer to evaluate their in-sample predictive accuracy in separate models, but in Model 4, we enter the three measures simultaneously. In additional tests reported in the online appendix, we assess whether results hold for subsets of the sample, alternative operationalizations of problem severity, and different estimators, including first difference estimators and negative binomial count models.

In order to adjudicate between Models 1–3, we want to determine which statistical representation of IO problem prioritization best fits the observed data. For this purpose, we evaluate the comparative performance of each model, placing particular attention on four measures of goodness of fit: Akaike information criterion (AIC), Bayesian information criterion (BIC), R^2, and root-mean-squared errors (RMSE). By pitting alternative models against each other, we can identify the best-performing model as the one with the highest R^2 and lowest AIC, BIC, and RMSE.

These tests suggest, first, that IOs are responsive to security problem severity. The coefficient on the unweighted

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[7]Wooldridge's (2010) test for autocorrelated errors in first-differenced panel models fails to reject the null that there is no serial autocorrelation.

Table 2. Conflict problem severity and IO security policy output, fixed effects estimator

	DV: security policy output			
	(1)	*(2)*	*(3)*	*(4)*
Problem severity, unweighted $(t-1)$	32.86**			23.30**
	(4.33)			(3.72)
Problem severity, dependence-weighted $(t-1)$		−0.51		−5.61*
		(1.89)		(1.06)
Problem severity, power-weighted $(t-1)$			8.59**	8.23**
			(3.30)	(2.68)
Pooling	−66.93**	−70.98**	−70.89**	−63.65**
	(12.09)	(19.41)	(17.09)	(10.21)
Delegation	4.61	−6.23	−6.00	−5.59
	(7.39)	(13.85)	(9.68)	(4.36)
TNA access	14.41	14.41	12.89	10.65
	(14.12)	(14.98)	(11.57)	(11.47)
Membership size (log)	25.40	31.70	29.41	22.08
	(17.83)	(21.16)	(16.14)	(14.57)
Preference heterogeneity	−38.55**	−52.81*	−35.70*	−31.25**
	(12.31)	(20.66)	(16.44)	(9.34)
Staff size	−0.70	−0.94	−1.02	−0.58
	(0.92)	(0.69)	(0.88)	(0.96)
Democratic density	44.13	53.94	59.10*	40.58
	(27.41)	(30.35)	(26.86)	(25.27)
Security mandate	−0.69	−1.04	0.27	−0.21
	(1.88)	(2.20)	(1.90)	(1.60)
Observations	219	219	219	219
R^2	0.38	0.26	0.32	0.41
Adjusted R^2	0.20	0.04	0.12	0.22
AIC	1587	1614	1603	1534
BIC	1621	1649	1637	1575
RMSE	8.65	9.23	8.98	7.61
F statistic	11.43**	6.66**	8.90**	10.30**

Note: Scaled severity variables. Fixed effects for IOs and years. Robust errors clustered on IOs. Two-tailed tests.
*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$.

measure of problem severity in Model 1 is statistically significant at the $p < 0.01$ level, indicating a positive relationship between lagged security problem severity and policy output with a security orientation. We do not find a significant relationship between the dependence-weighted measure and policy output (Model 2). The power-weighted measure of problem severity predicts IO policy output (Model 3; $p < 0.01$), but the coefficient on the scaled variable suggests that the effect is of smaller magnitude than the unweighted problem-severity variable.

Second, of the three separate models, the unweighted severity model (1) provides the best fit with the data. It has the highest R^2, the lowest AIC, the lowest BIC, and the lowest RMSE, indicating that it has the highest in-sample predictive accuracy. The power-weighted model comes in second, trailing the unweighted severeness model on all fit metrics, but outperforms the dependence-weighted model.

Including all the theoretical representations in the same model (4) yields largely similar results. There are positive associations between the unweighted and power-weighted versions of problem severity and security policy output and a weaker negative relationship for the dependence-weighted version.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the average IO is responsive to security problem severity and that its responsiveness is primarily driven by the severeness of the problem for membership as a whole rather than which member states are affected specifically. Our data also indicate that, to

the extent that membership asymmetries matter, power is a more fundamental factor than trade dependencies. These findings provide important corroboration for the notion that IOs respond to the severeness of a problem alone and in line with their mandates, generalizing earlier findings on the UN's responsiveness (Beardsley and Schmidt 2012), while also indicating some conditioning factors.

Our results also provide information regarding the impact of control variables, specifically regarding variation in actors, interests, and institutional features.

The coefficient for preference heterogeneity is negative and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), indicating that, increases in preference heterogeneity make IOs less responsive to problem severity, which is consistent with our theoretical expectation.

We find no firm result regarding membership size, but democratic density predicts higher security policy output in some models, indicating the possibility that IOs with increasing share of democracies in the membership are more inclined to cooperate around security.

With regard to institutional features, we find that higher degrees of pooling are associated with lower levels of output, all else equal. This suggests that majoritarian decision-making, contrary to the conventional expectation in an institutionalist theory, reduces an IO's ability to adapt to changes in its environment. Delegation, TNA access, and staff resources do not appear to change output levels.

Finally, we find that variation in security mandate does not explain variation in security-related output, controlling for other factors. It suggests that the scope of an IO's security mandate is not decisive for policy output when armed conflicts involving member states erupt. Rather, as long as IOs are involved in security, they are likely to respond to such increasing problem severity.

Extension: The Responsiveness of UN Security Council

A strength of the preceding analysis is that it captures a broad range of responses to the *overall level of conflict* involving an IO's members. To complement this approach, we carry out an additional analysis, focusing on one IO body, the UN Security Council, and its responsiveness to *specific armed conflicts.* The Security Council is the central venue for intergovernmental bargaining over responses to armed conflict and its main output, resolutions, are binding under international law. Focusing on the Security Council allows us to undertake extended tests of our three theoretical accounts while exploiting opportunities for more precise measurement of conflict severity and more certain attribution of policy responses to a particular conflict.

Our dependent variable is a binary indicator coded as 1 if the Council adopted a *resolution* in response to an active armed conflict in the year of observation, and 0 otherwise. This variable is constructed from two underlying sources. We use UCDP data (Pettersson and Öberg 2020) to construct a panel of active armed conflicts, 1989–2019, and we use information on resolutions provided in Frederking and Patane (2017; data extended through 2019) to identify which of these were the subject of resolutions.

On the explanatory side, we measure variation in conflict severity based on *share of battle deaths*, operationalized as the count of "deaths caused by the warring parties that can be directly related to combat" in the conflict country (Pettersson and Öberg 2020), divided by all such deaths in the UN membership (essentially global) in the year of observation. Consequently, the variable ranges between 0 and 1, with higher values indicating that a conflict generated a greater proportion of global battle deaths in a given year (a value of 1 would correspond to all deaths in that year). We measure economic dependence based on *share of trade*, operationalized as the proportion of the permanent five (P5) countries' trade with the conflict country as a proportion of all their trade in the year prior to observation (calculated based on data from Barbieri and Keshk 2012).[8] We measure the influence of power based on *share of power*, operationalized as the share of national material capabilities (CINC) the conflict country had in the year prior to observation. Analogously to our previous approach, we represent the three theoretical models of IO responsiveness by including both an unweighted measure of problem severity (battle deaths) and weighted measures, expressed in the form of interactions with our trade and power measures.

We control for population size, liberal democracy, and whether a country is adjacent to or a former colony of one of the P5 members of the Security Council. Mindful of institutional path dependencies, we also include a dummy indicator coded as 1 if there was a UN peacekeeping operation in the country in the year of observation, since these tend to generate repeated resolutions on the same conflict (Di Salvatore et al. 2022).

We model the annual probability of a UNSC resolution using logistic regression. We cluster errors on conflict countries and include a cubic time polynomial to account for temporal effects (Beck, Katz, and Tucker 1998). The main results are presented in table 3.

As can be seen in Model 1, there is a strong relationship between conflict severity, measured as battle deaths, and the probability of the UN Security Council adopting a resolution on the concerned conflict. The estimate is positive and significant at the $p < 0.01$ level. Calculated as an average marginal effect, increasing the share of global battle deaths from zero to 20 percent is associated with a 20-percentage-point increase in the predicted probability of a resolution response by the Security Council (figure 3).

In Models 2 and 3, we include interactions to gauge whether the association between conflict severity and resolutions is conditional on where the conflict takes place, our way to represent the dependence and power models in this part of the analysis. These interactions are not significant at the $p < 0.05$ level. In other words, we cannot say that the Security Council's reaction to conflict severity is conditional on the conflict country's share of global trade or power (while noting that power, as a constituent term, is a predictor in Model 1). This finding lends further credence to the general finding above that the severeness of a problem, in and of itself, is a key predictor of IO policy output.

Regarding the controls, we find that peacekeeping operations are strongly associated with Security Council resolutions, increasing the predicted probability by 55 percentage points. In addition, all else equal, conflict countries that are more democratic and have larger populations are less likely to see a resolution response from the Security Council. Likewise, proximity or colonial ties to any of the P5 do not seem to matter. These findings may suggest that the UN's response is partly decided on the capabilities of the affected country, which can be expected to be increasing with the level of democracy and population size.

Robustness

To probe the robustness of the main results from our analysis of our larger sample of IOs, we carried out three types of additional tests. First, we explored whether the general results hold up in models fitted on smaller subsets of the data. As can be seen in the online appendix, the results are robust to excluding the UN (table A4 in the online appendix). This suggests that the results are not driven by the UN's dominant position in peace and security, or other particularities relating to the expectation that the UN maintains higher standards of responsiveness to armed conflict. Indeed, when the UN is excluded the unweighted severeness model performs even better compared to the other two models, reinforcing the conclusion that dynamics that have been identified in the context of the UN have a more general validity (cf. Beardsley and Schmidt 2012).

Second, we evaluated several alternative formulations of problem severity and security policy output. Defining conflict involvement based strictly on location, rather than on dyadic involvement, as we do in table A5 in the online appendix, does not change the main results. Extending the time frame and including conflicts from the three preceding years in the problem severity aggregate leaves the unweighted model as the best performer (table A6 in the online appendix). Other tests indicate that expanding the definition of security policy to cover a wider range of topics (table A7 in the online appendix) or restricting it to the narrow core of conflict management (table A8 in the online

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[8]We focus on the permanent members because they have the most influence over policy-making and because their continuous membership yields a complete time series.

Table 3. Conflict severity (battle deaths) and resolutions, UN Security Council

	DV: UNSC resolution		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Share of battle deaths	10.95**	10.08**	13.86**
	(2.44)	(2.51)	(3.29)
Share of trade	−19.39	−23.44	−19.57
	(11.11)	(13.23)	(10.52)
Share of power	27.07*	18.43	37.42**
	(13.24)	(18.72)	(12.92)
Peacekeeping operation	3.94**	3.94**	3.95**
	(0.33)	(0.33)	(0.33)
Liberal democracy index	−4.41**	−4.40**	−4.41**
	(0.76)	(0.76)	(0.76)
Population	−28.77**	−28.26**	−27.48**
	(4.69)	(4.68)	(4.49)
P5 contiguity	−0.07	−0.05	−0.09
	(0.26)	(0.26)	(0.26)
P5 colony	0.12	0.13	0.09
	(0.22)	(0.22)	(0.22)
Share of battle deaths × share of trade		503.18	
		(307.24)	
Share of battle deaths × share of power			−1,075.68
			(973.84)
Constant	−1.32**	−1.28**	−1.38**
	(0.47)	(0.47)	(0.48)
Observations	888	888	888
Log likelihood	−289.39	−288.69	−288.49
Akaike inf. crit.	602.78	603.38	602.97

Logit estimates. Robust errors clustered on conflict countries. Cubic time polynomial not shown. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$.
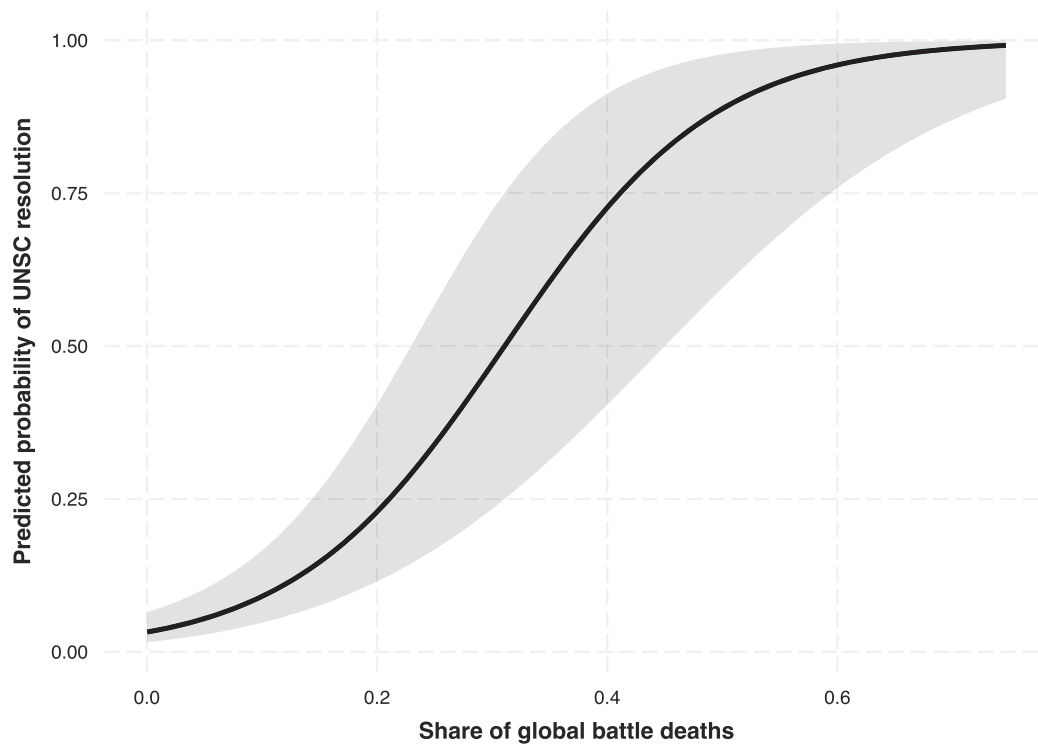
Figure 3. Predicted probability of UNSC resolution as a function of the share of global battle deaths in conflict country.

appendix) do not alter the key result (see table A1 in the online appendix for the topic codes). Weighting power differently, awarding weight to an armed conflict only if it involves one of the five most powerful members of an IO (a "dominant power" model),[9] leaves the key results unchanged (table A9 in the online appendix). Models in which severity is weighted by refugee flows or alliance ties to powerful countries (table A10 in the online appendix) do not yield better-performing models than the unweighted severeness model. Weighting conflicts by colonial links to powerful countries, as we did in extended tests on the UNSC, indicates that this body is particularly responsive to more deadly conflicts in countries that were previously colonies of the P5, while alliances with the P5 make no difference (table A11 in the online appendix). We also find that refugees are a strong predictor of UNSC resolutions, underlining that this institution's responsiveness is shaped by the scale of problems (table A11 in the online appendix).

Third, we refitted our statistical models using alternative estimators. In table A12 in the online appendix, we report findings for a first difference estimator, which estimates 1-year changes in the dependent variable as a function of changes in the independent variables over the same time frame, yielding an alternative way of controlling for unobserved cross-sectional heterogeneity (Wooldridge 2010). Table A13 in the online appendix reports a random effects negative binomial count model. Both models reinforce the conclusion that IOs are more likely to respond to security concerns arising from armed conflict in a manner placing most emphasis on problem severity, in terms of scale, rather than on which type of member states are involved.

Conclusion

Responsiveness to the policy problems that afflict member states is a prerequisite for IOs to deliver on their missions. Yet, so far, existing research has offered few insights into whether and when IOs are responsive to policy problems. This article has sought to address this gap by developing and testing three models of IO responsiveness using novel data on the problem severity facing IOs as well as their policy responses. Specifically, we have examined the responsiveness of eight multi-issue IOs to armed conflict and offered an in-depth extension focused specifically on the UN Security Council.

Our findings show that IOs, indeed, are responsive to changes in security problems and suggest that such responsiveness is greater under certain conditions. When the rates of armed conflict shift in the membership of an IO, such changes lead to predictable shifts in policy output aimed at reducing conflict. The severeness model, giving equal attention to the problems of all member states, provides the best overall fit with the data. Models predicting IOs to be particularly responsive to problems experienced by more important trading partners or more powerful member states fit the data less well. These general findings are largely replicated in our study of the resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council, which are strongly shaped by conflict severity. Taken together, these findings suggest, first, that the IOs we have examined typically are responsive to security problems and, second, that their responsiveness is not primarily driven by asymmetries in dependence or power but by the unmitigated severeness of the problem.

While these findings are based on unique data on policy output in a comparative sample of IOs, we should also be aware of the limitations of this first foray into IO responsiveness. Notably, we have focused exclusively on armed conflict. We did this because security is an area central to many IOs, because prior research suggests security is a suitable test case, and because this focus liberates us from having to make strong assumptions about response lag times. But armed conflict is only one type of problem; it may be that a consideration of other types of issues, with other problem structures and patterns in externalities, might lead to other results. Expanding the study of IO responsiveness to other types of problems, such as health epidemics, human rights violations, and trade barriers, is an important task for future research.

If we take these results at face value, then they suggest three broader implications for research on global governance. First, these findings are good news for the effectiveness and performance of IOs (Gutner and Thompson 2010; Young 2011; Lall 2023). While being responsive to changes in problem severity is but a first step in mitigating those problems, it is a necessary and important one (Tallberg et al. 2016). It suggests that IOs, despite widespread fears of gridlock (Hale and Held 2017), are sensitive to changes in the problems they are set to govern and adapt their policy agendas accordingly (Lundgren et al. 2018). Responsiveness thus lays the groundwork for IOs to contribute to problem-solving, if such impact also requires that the agreed policies are appropriate and implemented by states.

Second, these results suggest that IOs may be less selective and biased in their policy responses than is often assumed. It is a common claim that IOs would cater specifically to the interests of the most powerful member states (Gruber 2000; Stone 2011) or to the parochial interests of politicians, bureaucrats, and lobby groups (Dreher and Lang 2019). Our findings instead indicate that IOs in their responsiveness to policy problems are truer to their organizational missions than such claims lead us to believe (Beardsley and Schmidt 2012). It appears that security IOs are most responsive when worsening conditions affect the problem severity experienced by the membership as a whole, rather than more limited interests, such as the most important trading states or the most powerful states in the membership.

Third, these findings suggest that IO responsiveness may have positive knock-on implications for the perceived legitimacy of these organizations (Tallberg and Zürn 2019). Prior research indicates that prominent sources of legitimacy for IOs relate to organizational features. When people perceive the procedures and performances of IOs to be more democratic, effective, and fair, they also tend to extend more legitimacy to these organizations (Anderson et al 2019; Dellmuth et al. 2019). The good news about IO responsiveness being evenhanded and based on the severity of a problem, as opposed to dependency and power, is that these organizations may attract greater legitimacy as a result of how they deal with the problems they seek to manage.

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[9]For example, in the African Union, the five most powerful members based on CINC (in 2015) were Nigeria, South Africa, Egypt, Algeria, and Kenya; consequently, only conflicts involving these states would count toward the value of the AU problem severity variable.

Supplementary Information

Supplementary information (the online appendix) is available at the *International Studies Quarterly* data archive.

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