

stable in the first place. However, they are not immutable but instead subject to reflection, contestation, and reinterpretation' (p. 12). Different from IR's focus on how pathways to participation facilitate access to contestation, the book explores distinct paths of change: the 'state action path', the 'multilateral path', the 'bureaucratic path', the 'judicial path' and the 'private authority path' (pp. 13–15). The five 'are not mutually exclusive—often enough they will run in parallel or crisscross, bolstering or undercutting each other' (p. 15). Moreover, 'the interactions between pathways produce a range of effects from solidifying legal change by creating focal points, to giving grounds for (further) legal contestation by providing alternative interpretations' (p. 15). The paths are traced over time and the contributors identify three stages that are 'crucial for the process to be successfully completed' (p. 15). First, we have the 'selection stage' where 'change agents choose and activate a pathway to realize their vision of change' (p. 15). Second, at the 'construction stage', 'actors and authorities associated with the particular pathway process the change attempts and generate statements about the status of the norm in question' (p. 16). Third and last, during the 'reception stage', the 'outcome of the construction stage is appraised by a broader range of actors' and 'change attempts are accepted, partially accepted, or rejected' (p. 16). At each stage, state positions, norm properties, institutional support and discursive openings can have combined effects on the dynamics at play (pp. 18–26).

This edited volume brings together leading scholars who have made significant contributions to the emerging interdisciplinary exchange between international law and IR. A sequel may take a cue from recent IR norms research to explore how the concept of functionally distinct paths (reflecting change) may advance towards desirable pathways (enabling change). The book makes a ground-breaking contribution to international law, emphasizing that it is 'first and foremost an empirical question' as to which 'factors can determine the relevant pathways and account for the speed and success of change attempts in international law' (p. 31). In addition, the book accounts for the law's own pace of change, inviting IR scholars to engage with the effects of political and societal agency on international law.

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Discriminatory clubs: the geopolitics of international organizations. By **Christina L. Davis**. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2023. 472pp. £92.00. ISBN 978 0 69124 779 3. Available as e-book.

Today, it is easy to overlook the profound impact that functionalist theories have had on the study of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs). While realist ideas have often dominated discussions of global power dynamics, functionalist perspectives argue that economic interdependence—not merely power politics—fuels the demand for institutionalized cooperation. Yet, as Christina Davis reveals in her latest book, international organizations are far more than instruments of cooperation. They act as 'discriminatory clubs', where states seek membership not only for functional benefits but to align with like-minded powers and to elevate their

geopolitical standing. Davis takes an intriguing approach to membership politics, portraying IGOs as both gatekeepers and platforms for geopolitical manoeuvring. She tackles questions central to the field: how do states choose their partners? And are international organizations inherently selective?

By framing IGOs as exclusive clubs, the book challenges conventional theories on multilateral cooperation, exposing inefficiencies in how states wield membership criteria to serve strategic interests. Mapping membership politics across hundreds of organizations is no small task, yet Davis tackles this methodological challenge with impressive rigour. She balances quantitative analysis with in-depth case-studies, illustrating how alignment with dominant powers can ease entry barriers. Through an analysis of 322 IGO charters, Davis finds that nearly 80 per cent operate as selective clubs (p. 61). She then focuses on illustrative cases—such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)—to show how power dynamics shape entry standards.

Davis argues that states often seek membership for reasons extending beyond the stated mandates. In the OECD, for instance, membership is about joining a club of like-minded, influential states that offers reputational advantages and reinforces shared norms. New members commit to substantial reforms, solidifying the OECD's role as a gatekeeper of economic best practices. Although Davis focuses on formal IGOs, her findings resonate with the informal alliances that are reshaping today's global power dynamics. Groups like the BRICS+ have gained prominence as flexible platforms for emerging powers to pursue diverse political and economic interests without the rigid commitments of traditional organizations. The stance of several BRICS+ members, including China and India, reflects a calculated approach to forum shopping. This quality mirrors the selective entry practices Davis observes in some formal IGOs. One of Davis's most compelling insights is her examination of how loosely defined entry criteria can lead to overexpansion, fuelling the demand for more exclusive organizations (p. 396).

Davis demonstrates how states join not only for policy collaboration but to strengthen their geopolitical positioning. Informal alliances like BRICS+ follow a similar logic, driven by a shared interest in counterbalancing western influence. Davis addresses the limitations of her focus on formal IGOs directly, and her rationale is as convincing as one could expect, given the subjectivity of the treaties underpinning her analysis. While the book's focus on formal IGOs is understandable, a review of informal IGOs would add more depth to the insights. In some ways, informal IGOs have the potential to disrupt the established international order. Despite—or perhaps because of—their informality, groups like BRICS+ have gained significant traction, accumulating considerable geopolitical influence, though with limited efficiency so far.

Davis rightly argues that instead of 'a new way of categorizing IGOs, we need a new perspective on the logic of cooperation' (p. 384). Her analysis extends beyond great power politics, showing that while major powers shape institutions, other states also leverage membership criteria to serve their interests. Middle powers, which play a critical role in addressing universal issues like climate change, global

health and digital governance, often avoid taking sides. Instead, they navigate around formal discriminatory clubs to advance their geopolitical goals. The liberal institutionalist literature supports this view, regarding informality as an optimal design for cooperation requiring speed, flexibility and low transaction costs. When states form club-style IGOs, cooperation may be lower than in merit-based models. However, it would be a mistake to see these institutions as ineffective: member states have deliberately prioritized status and economic strategy over maximizing cooperation. As states grapple with the limitations of the formal agreements within discriminatory clubs and shift coordination to more flexible forums, research like Davis's has the potential to reach beyond academia, guiding policy-makers towards more strategic and foresighted institutional choices. Her insights reveal how states turn what might appear as neutral and discriminatory entities into instruments of influence.

Whether the current international system will endure remains an open-ended question, but international institutions are poised to play a lasting role in global governance. Davis's book illuminates the forces that shape these organizations, providing a measure of optimism for their revival. In the end, the cost of disengagement will undoubtedly be much higher.

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Conflict, security and defence

Near and far waters: the geopolitics of seapower. By **Colin Flint**. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press. 2024. 264pp. £87.00. ISBN 978 1 50363 964 5. Available as e-book.

The Neptune factor: Alfred Thayer Mahan and the concept of sea power. By **Nicholas A. Lambert**. Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press. 2024. 448pp. £34.95. ISBN 978 1 61251 158 0. Available as e-book.

The concept of sea power is undergoing an international renaissance, as is the study of it. Colin Flint offers a foundational book for novice readers interested in learning about the geopolitics of sea power. In *Near and far waters*, sea power is defined as 'the possession and use of large and effective military and merchant fleets to achieve interests and goals' (p. 1). The author charts the ebbs and flows of sea power through history, underscoring its 'virtuous cycle' to illustrate how economic wealth can be invested in a nation's sea power and then how those investments can yield further national wealth (p. 1).

Understanding the link between sea power and national standing—or national security—requires a firm grasp of geopolitics. Luckily, the book provides a master-class on the interconnections between geopolitics and the study of sea power. Chapter three stands out as a significant contribution, mapping the rise and fall of sea power nations throughout history. In this chapter, readers gain a firmer understanding of how sea power can move a nation from its 'near' to its 'far' waters, demonstrating the geopolitics of sea power in action. Flint offers the case-study