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Drifting Apart: Examining the Consequences of States' Dissociation from International Cooperation – A Framework

Matthias Dembinski & Dirk Peters *

Abstract: »Trennungsprozesse: Die Folgen der Dissoziierung von Staaten aus internationaler Kooperation – ein Untersuchungsrahmen«. Dissociation from international institutions, i.e., states turning away from international cooperation and organizations, is a widespread phenomenon today. It often leads to significant tensions between the states that turn away and those that remain committed to an institution. This introduction to a forum on dissociation from international institutions reviews the state of the art and develops a framework for analyzing the impact of dissociation on relations between departing and remaining states. It centers on the hypothesis that dissociation leads to two types of conflicts between states, ideational and distributive, with ideational conflicts more likely to increase tensions between states. The article then reviews the five cases of dissociation examined in the other contributions to the forum and summarizes their main individual and comparative findings. Taken together, the five cases suggest that dissociation can exacerbate broader structural conflicts between states; that how parties perceive of conflict during the dissociation process matters for its effects on interstate relations and that an emphasis on ideational conflict leads to more confrontational relations; and that domestic politics matter greatly not only for whether dissociation occurs but also for its effects on interstate relations.

Keywords: Dissociation, withdrawal, international institutions.

1. Introduction¹

The global institutional order is in crisis. Dissociation, that is, states moving away from international institutions, is the most visible and unambiguous

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expression of this crisis. When states dissociate from international institutions, they terminate their membership in international organizations or ignore their institutional commitments or build alternative institutions to undermine existing ones. The British withdrawal from the European Union, President Trump's de facto blockade of the World Trade Organization, or the Russian violation of and America's withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty) are recent examples of this phenomenon. Dissociation might even evolve into the defining trend of the future global order. De-globalization is the new buzzword after the disruptions that the financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic have caused. Developments in the wake of the Russian war against Ukraine even suggest that the highly interdependent post-Cold War order might fully unravel or break up into a Western and a Sino-Russian sphere.

While dissociation is an indicator of the crisis of international institutions, it does not only affect the institutions in question. Dissociation can also significantly affect interstate relations. It often creates considerable tension between leaving states and those states that seek to maintain the agreements. This is true of recent cases, like Russia's drift out of European security arrangements, which arguably had a greater impact on the relations between Russia and Western countries than on the institutions from which Russia dissociated itself. The same can be said of cases from past decades, for example Iran's sudden withdrawal from Western economic and political cooperation after 1979 and China's withdrawal from the Soviet-dominated communist order in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Such conflicts over dissociation are of enormous political importance and they have the tendency to produce high levels of tensions. Nonetheless, such conflicts and their escalatory potential have not yet been systematically explored in the academic literature even though understanding them better might help to develop strategies to defuse them. It is this gap in research that this HSR Forum seeks to address.

It starts out from the observation that dissociation processes can create tensions between states that move away from institutions and those that maintain them. The level of tensions between dissociating and remaining states is variable, though, and the contributions to this forum explore whether and how the process of dissociation itself affects the level of future tensions between the two sides. The core proposition that all contributions address is that dissociations which are treated by the actors as emanating from a conflict

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over basic values will affect interstate relations more negatively than dissociations that are viewed as the result of distributional conflicts.

This article lays the groundwork for the contributions and summarizes their main findings. We begin by locating our research endeavor in the existing state of the art on institutional crisis and highlighting the significance of the existing gap in research. We then develop the theoretical argument about how dissociation is likely to create two types of conflicts between states, ideational and distributional conflicts, and why the former contribute more to the development of tensions between states than the latter. We will also provide an overview over the five cases of dissociation that the other contributions to the forum examine and summarize their main findings against the backdrop of the framework and the core proposition.

2. Dissociation: A Significant Gap in Research on the Crisis of International Institutions

Until recently, dissociation has rarely attracted academic interest. By dissociation we mean a process in which states have such different views about the core rules and norms of an international institution that this leads to institutional changes that distance a state from the existing institution. This distancing can take various forms. In particular, three typical forms can be distinguished:

- a. Withdrawal or exclusion from an institution. This is the most obvious form of dissociation, and it can lead to deep institutional crisis if the leaving state was considered central to the functioning of the institution.
- b. Systematic non-compliance. States may remain formally committed to an institution but de facto no longer abide by its rules and norms.
- c. Establishment of alternative institutions. This is an implicit form of dissociation. States may formally adhere to an institution, but in parallel build a competing institution that is intended to render the original institution permanently obsolete (Morse and Keohane 2014).

What all these forms of dissociation have in common is that they make clear how controversial the institution in question has become. This can destabilize the institution, but it can also strain the relations between the dissociating state and those states that remain committed to the institution. However, research to date has focused only on the former aspect. It looks at a broader “crisis” of international institutions and hardly examines dissociation as a phenomenon in its own right that can directly affect interstate relations. This is probably rooted in the fact that much of the research on international relations has focused specifically on the establishment, growth, and positive

effects of international institutions, understood here broadly as comprising conventions, regimes, and international organizations (Keohane 1988, 386). Starting from the assumption that institutions embody “the rules of the game in a society or [...] the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction” (North 1990, 3), research generally described international institutions as persistent and resilient (Flockhart 2020, 216). In fact, given that states create institutions and design them in ways so that they serve their interests, solve collective action problems, and enhance welfare and peace, institutional crisis or even decay would be highly surprising.

Hence contestation and dissociation are puzzling as they appear to destabilize what had been viewed as a powerful stabilizing factor of international politics before. And attacks against international institutions were on the rise since the 2000s. Contestation by non-state actors and rising powers (Stephen and Zürn 2019) was gradually complemented by attacks against the liberal institutional order from within the Western camp, most prominently by the US administration under Donald Trump, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. The European Union, certainly the most advanced international institution, was struck by a multidimensional crisis and even saw one of its leading members leave.

In reaction to this, research focused on the “crisis” of the liberal order that had once appeared so stable. Until today, this research focuses mainly on two central issues: the causes of this crisis and its implications for international order.

Regarding the *causes of the crisis*, many scholars emphasize endogenous factors and agree that the liberal international order has become the victim of its own success (Lake, Martin, and Risse 2021). According to this view, the postnational liberal order that emerged in the 1990s differed from its predecessor in three ways (Börzel and Zürn 2021). First, it is endowed with more authority. To increase institutional efficiency and effectiveness, member states loosened their formerly tight control over international organizations, moved to non-consensual decision-making, and equipped institutions with international bureaucracies such as secretariats and tribunals. Thus, international organizations gained authority beyond the direct control of member states (Zürn 2018). Secondly, against the backdrop of liberalism seemingly taking root in all parts of the world, liberal international institutions that were formerly confined to the Western world expanded their memberships. Other institutions with a broad geographical scope and heterogeneous membership such as the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and the UN adopted a more liberal outlook. Thirdly, institutions that were formerly designed to organize interstate relations became more intrusive and affected economic and social conditions within states usually with the effect of opening up formerly restricted and nationally controlled policy spaces.

Yet the success of multilateral and liberal institutionalism provoked opposition and counter-movements from three sides. Within Western states, neo-sovereignists and populist movements representing segments of society that stand to lose from globalization and the opening up of formerly regulated policy fields became politically significant. They rallied under the flags of freedom and national self-determination against overly intrusive and authoritative international organizations (Simmons and Goemans 2021; Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021). Even more consequential was the resistance of new member states. As processes of transformation stalled, and as the divide between liberal institutional norms and authoritarian practices deepened, governments in new member states began to perceive these institutions as a threat to their rule (Cooley 2019). This opposition against the liberal order and its institutions deepened, as state power was gradually strengthened in authoritarian states like Russia. However, scholars also identify more complex causal chains between persisting authoritarianism and the liberal order. Weiss and Wallace (2021), for example, argue that China's ability to cherry-pick different norms of the liberal order and to benefit from its participation in the system has undermined the domestic consensus in the United States on preserving the liberal international order.² Lastly, a group of states mostly from the Global South, despite generally supporting liberal norms and multilateral institutions, protested against what they perceived as an unequal distribution of voice opportunities within international organizations and against powerful actors such as the United States because they applied norms selectively and in their own favor (Mazarr 2017, 26; Dembinski and Peters 2019a).

Within this context, a few texts have highlighted more systematically the strategies available to states that seek to contest international institutions with a view to the implications that these strategies might have for the institutional order. Julia Morse and Robert Keohane (2014) propose a framework of contestation strategies such as the building of alternative institutions and highlight resulting regime complexities. Gisela Hirschmann (2021) examines more aggressive tactics such as budget cuts, non-compliance with core norms, obstruction of staff appointments, and, as a last step, withdrawal and discusses their implications for the survival of international organizations.

Besides the causes of crisis, its implications and potential counter strategies have developed into a significant topic of debate among international relations scholars. Most realists argue that the liberal international order and its institutions are doomed and cannot be rescued by pragmatically lowering their sights (Mearsheimer 2019, 43). Others regard the order as more resilient. Deudney and Ikenberry (2018), for example, are convinced that the liberal multilateral order and its institutions will endure. They will endure

² See also the special issue of the *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 33:1 (2020).

because this order is deeply embedded, because growing interdependencies necessitate institutionalized cooperation, and because many key institutions like the G-20 are not liberal but rather Westphalian and able to accommodate non-liberal states and their interests. Others who share this view argue that the setbacks that many international organizations are currently experiencing look less dramatic when compared to earlier periods (Gray 2020; Copelovitch, Hobolt, and Walter 2020).

Somewhat sandwiched between these two strands of literature are a few texts that examine the death of international organizations (Debre and Dijkstra 2021; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2021). They explore both the causes of institutional weakening and, by implication, the potential for resilience and stability. They point, in particular, to the level of institutionalization, for example the existence of centralized structures or the age of an organization, as determinant of its resilience. Just like the main body of research, however, their focus is on the institutions and their fate. What this research has hardly acknowledged so far is that contestation and dissociation can have significant effects even if the institutions concerned remain resilient. It can have implications for the bilateral relations between those states that loosen their ties to an institution or exit from it and those that remain committed to that institution. Research has paid almost no attention to these effects.

This is somewhat surprising as states' disengagement from institutions is often embedded in broader conflictual relations with their partners in that institution and dissociation actually has the potential to exacerbate or mitigate existing tensions. Dissociating states often have been perceived as "difficult partners" in the institution for a while. The UK's role in the European Union, Russia's relation to Western security institutions, and China's role in the international financial order are obvious examples. On the one hand, dissociation introduces an additional set of issues into this relationship. The desirability of a separation, its causes, and its terms usually are contentious issues. Is it right for one state to leave (or be thrown out of) the institution? Is anyone to blame for the separation and the costs it causes? What are the terms of the separation and what happens to the obligations the dissociating state and the others had towards each other? Thus, dissociation can easily create tensions between states or exacerbate existing ones by introducing additional lines of conflict.

However, dissociation may also help to defuse tensions between states in the long run. The decoupling will reduce the density of future interactions and thus also the opportunity for conflict. The process of dissociation itself provides an opportunity for states to address their conflicts head on, to arrive at mutually agreed solutions, and to create a clean slate for their future relations. Hence, states may build the basis for a constructive future relationship if they manage the dissociation process successfully: by resolving outstanding issues and creating a common understanding that coexistence without

institutionalization is not only possible but actually in the best interest of everyone involved (Dembinski and Peters 2019b).

Which route will a given dissociation take? Which effects will it have on the post-dissociation relations between the former partners? Will it contribute to the easing of tensions, or will it make them worse? Given the fact that previous research focuses so strongly on the institutional order and has little to say about effects on interstate relations, we will develop here a framework for research into the effects of dissociation from scratch.

3. Dissociation and Tensions in Interstate Relations: A Framework

The starting point for our framework is the observation that dissociation processes do two things at the same time. They end the old, institutionalized relationship between the two former partners and simultaneously forge the new relation between them. For reasons to which we will turn shortly, breaking off the old relation tends to be a tense and conflict-laden process. And it is this conflictive process that also constitutes the nucleus of the future relation between the two sides. Hence, dissociation processes tend to create future tensions between the states concerned. We will spell out this argument in more detail by, first, examining key characteristics of institutionalized relations and, secondly, exploring how dissociation disrupts these relations and creates potential for conflict. States have to deal with these conflicts during the dissociation process and we will, thirdly, argue that how they do so will shape their future relation.

3.1 Dissociation: Disrupting Institutions

Institutions are key stabilizers for interstate relations and dissociating from them implies disrupting them and creates the need to redefine those relations. To better understand the disruptive potential that is inherent in dissociation, let us first examine the stabilizing functions of institutions more closely.

In the broadest sense, institutions constitute the “rules of the game” (North 1990) for interactions, they are sets of implicit and explicit norms and rules for how actors should act in a certain area. In international politics, institutions usually emerge as attempts to solve collective action problems and to produce a common good. An ideal-type institution can be understood as the result of agreement among participants that following this specific set of norms and rules will help to solve the problem in question (maintaining free trade, saving the ozone layer, ensuring military security, etc.). The key effect of institutions, then, is that they stabilize expectations in a given policy field

about how others will act (e.g., Young 1982, 277). If states follow the rules, institutions may create a self-reinforcing process of deepening and widening cooperation through which uncertainty is reduced. States can increasingly rely on other members of the institution to act as the norms and rules prescribe.

But institutions do not only affect expectations about future behavior in the given area; they also have wider effects on the relations between the participating states. In the ideational realm, institutions contribute to the emergence of social communities. First of all, the institution itself constitutes a social community as its norms and rules serve as yardsticks for what is regarded as appropriate and inappropriate behavior there. But the ideational effects may also run deeper than that. Institutions establish or reproduce social hierarchies that are effective beyond the institution itself (Fehl and Freistein 2020). And often institutions are embedded in a wider social order, for example a liberal economic order or a balance-of-power system revolving around a set of great powers. By virtue of stabilizing expectations related to these orders, they reinforce and stabilize them.

Aside from their ideational effects, the norms and rules also affect the distribution of material benefits and costs and thus have a redistributive effect. Trading according to a certain set of norms, organizing security, or regulating behavior to protect the environment creates costs and benefits that are unevenly distributed. Similar to its ideational effects, the redistributive effects of an institution are not confined to the realm of the institution itself. They contribute to more persistent patterns of distribution both internationally, among states, and domestically, where they will benefit certain societal or business groups more than others.

While the ideational and redistributive effects can be separated analytically, they are produced by the same institutional processes. As actors accept norms and rules as guides for their actions, they affirm their character as standards of behavior and become subject to their redistributive effects simultaneously. The economic realm provides the most straightforward illustrations for this. A free-trade regime, for example, will domestically strengthen export-heavy industries and weaken those which are not prepared for international competition. Internationally it is likely to benefit countries with developed processing industries more than those which rely on the export of raw materials. By its very existence, however, it also serves to reinforce the idea that free trade is the appropriate way of exchanging goods internationally. While such effects may be most obvious in the economic sphere, they do occur for international institutions in all issue areas.

Institutions thus affect the relationship between the participating states in profound ways. Early integration theories took a particularly positive view of these changes. They expected that the experience of mutually beneficial cooperation and the realignment of domestic coalitions and value

commitments associated with it could encourage cooperation in other policy areas. Neo-functional integration theories in particular identified such spill-over mechanisms. They argued that once states had established successful cooperation, they might be prepared to gradually broaden it and to equip international organizations with more authority to further solidify it. In turn, the organs of international organizations, working in tandem with realigned domestic interest groups, could then induce states to move cooperation even further from areas of “low politics” to more sensitive areas of “high politics” (Haas 1958). Deutsch et al. (1968) similarly argued that increasingly dense patterns of communication and the convergence towards similar values that is fostered by international institutions would gradually reduce uncertainty among the partners. It would establish trust and lead to a sense of community in which states no longer expect their partners to resort to war in the future. The result would be a stable zone of peace in which war would become unthinkable.

Even if this effect requires a particularly dense institutionalization of relations, the argument highlights the key effect that institutions have. They tend to create durable distributive patterns, to enhance reliability in interactions, and thus to contribute to stability in interstate relations.

Dissociation disrupts these effects and, by implication, is likely to create uncertainty and instability. The act of leaving an institution signals a state’s distancing from both the distributional and ideational implications of the institutions. At the very least, this creates uncertainty about how a state views the norms and rules and the distributional and social effects associated with the institution. More often, however, dissociation will be based on an explicit rejection of some or all of these effects.

3.2 Dissociation Conflicts: Distributional and Ideational

This implicit or explicit rejection of the institution’s effects creates the potential for conflict between the exiting state and those that remain in the institution. We will examine here distributional and ideational conflicts in turn and highlight how such conflicts may not only emerge with respect to the institution itself but also spill over into the wider relation between exiting and remaining states.

As far as the distributive effects of an institution are concerned, potential conflicts will revolve around the exiting state’s contribution to, and its share of, the common good produced by the institution. Will the state in question continue to seek to contribute? Does it seek a gradual reduction of its obligations or their immediate elimination? Does it wish to continue to benefit from the common good? In other words: How comprehensive is its rejection of the distributional aspect of the institution and how will states deal with the fallout?

These questions produce the potential for serious conflict about past investments and future commitments. The substance of these conflicts will depend on the substance of the institution. In a free-trade organization, for example, conflict will revolve around issues of future market access. How will it be organized? Will there be compensations for those who will suffer unexpected restrictions? In a security organization, past investments will pose significant problems. How will forces be disentangled? Will states receive compensation for the investments they had made in the expectation of future cooperation? A multi-issue organization like the European Union will produce an intricate web of distributional dissociation conflicts that provide an opportunity for extensive cross-issue bargaining, where future fishing quotas, for example, could be traded against compensation for previous investments in a joint space program and so on.

These conflicts are not exclusively interstate conflicts. Depending on their depth and age, the distributional effects of institutions will reach deep into societies and so will the distributional conflicts created by dissociation. As some domestic groups have benefitted from the institution in its original form, they are likely to seek protection during the dissociation process. Others will see their interests better served in a larger distance from the institution. Thus, interstate conflict will be complemented by domestic conflicts, which can significantly complicate the management of dissociation processes.

To make things worse, such conflicts can produce ripple effects and negative spill-over extending into other policy fields. States and domestic actors that are dissatisfied can try and seek compensation in other policy fields, for example. This entails the risk of escalation of conflicts across issue areas and into the future as long as individual parties remain dissatisfied with the new situation and believe that they have a realistic chance of compensating for their losses elsewhere.

Dissociation also disrupts the ideational side of institutionalized cooperation. In the future, how will the dissociating state relate to the social norms embedded in the institution? Does it reject them, which would create manifest conflict with the states that remain committed to them? Does its rejection even extend to the wider social norms, in which the specific institution was embedded, for example the “liberal order” at large? Such questions will linger in the context of any major dissociation, but whether conflicts will manifest and how they play out will be contingent on several factors. The perceived cause of the dissociation and experiences from the period preceding dissociation likely will be of particular importance. There are rather clear-cut cases in which both sides agree that dissociation is the result of a major ideational change on either side (for example the Iranian revolution or the end of socialism in East Germany). In such cases, both sides agree that dissociation marks

an ideational split between the two sides, and they openly disagree about the desirability of different models of social order.

In other cases, conflicts are more complex. There may be even disagreement about which side actually changed and thus caused dissociation. The remaining states may view the exiting state as having left the common ground of shared values whereas the state in question may insist that it was the others who excluded it. Take Russia's troubled relations with the West. From a Western perspective, they are often interpreted as the West having invited Russia into its community and Russia eventually deciding to reject the invitation. From a Russian perspective, the argument has been made that Western states increasingly pushed a Western interpretation of the joint institutions and thus it was them who left the common ground of shared understandings. Such conflicts create an additional layer of conflict about the causes of dissociation and about who did what to whom in the past.

Just like is the case with distributional conflicts, ideational dissociation conflicts might also occur on the domestic level. Societal groups that had shared the norms and ideas enshrined in the international institution will likely oppose dissociation, complicating the process especially for the dissociating state. In the states that remain committed to the institution, in contrast, both groups that support and groups that oppose the institutional ideas may become mobilized during the dissociation process, creating additional constraints on their governments as they seek to manage the dissociation process.

Overall, then, dissociation can result in both distributional and ideational conflicts, and it often will produce both at the same time. Take a state leaving the International Criminal Court (ICC), which was created to prevent impunity for grave international crimes. Dissociation will result, for example, in concrete questions about the state's future participation in the prosecution of war criminals. But there will also be more general questions about its normative position towards the impunity for grave international crimes.

Distributional conflicts are usually easier to resolve than ideational conflicts. Most of the time, there is the potential for bargaining and compromise solutions. It might not always be easy to identify viable compromises in a concrete conflict and to get both sides to agree to them. But their potential existence alone can serve to provide a focus for constructive engagement and a joint search for a solution that is acceptable. Ideational conflicts, in contrast, usually lack straightforward compromise solutions and do not lend themselves easily to rational bargaining. They usually run deeper as they are about membership in the same or different social groups. This also means that they often have more far-ranging consequences as they are about more *general* normative differences that are not necessarily related to individual issues only. Hence, they also more easily spill over into other issue areas and can envelop the whole set of relations between states. Take again the example of

a state leaving the ICC. While the concrete questions about contributions to the prosecution of alleged war criminals might be resolvable through compromise solutions, the ideational question of how the state relates to the impunity for grave international crimes runs deeper. In this respect, dissociation can be understood as the state distancing itself from a broadly shared consensus and thus moving outside the group of “civilized,” “modern,” or “liberal” states. This can lead to rising tensions and eventually to exclusion of that state from cooperative venues in other issue areas.

Therefore, we expect a dissociation process that is characterized primarily by ideational conflicts to generate more disruptive consequences and more severe tensions than a conflict that centers on distributional issues.

3.3 The Lasting Impact of Dissociation Conflicts: The Rise of Interstate Tensions

We claim not only that dissociation conflicts can be more or less easy to resolve, but also that they can have significant long-term consequences for the future relations between the states concerned. The new, de-institutionalized relationship is affected in at least two respects by how the old relationship ended.

First, not all dissociation conflicts are resolved in a short period of time. Some conflicts linger on and become a persistent factor in the relationship between the states involved. Ideational conflicts, in particular, seldom find a straightforward resolution. This would require that both sides affirm their joint commitment to a shared set of norms despite dissociation. And even in these cases, domestic groups may remain dissatisfied and reactivate the conflict later on when they gain more political influence. Therefore, ideational conflicts are very likely to remain a permanent factor in future relations. Similarly, distributional conflicts may persist. Even though they are easier to address and resolve, this does not guarantee that a solution is found. And here as well, dissatisfied domestic groups may later reactivate the conflict even if compromise solutions had been implemented.

Secondly, dissociation creates a more general problem of trust between the parties. When a state distances itself from a cooperative arrangement, can it be trusted in the future? While routinized interaction in an institution creates the expectation of reliability, dissociation undermines this expectation for the future.

In such a situation of uncertainty, states will seek ways to assess the future reliability of the dissociating state. As they cannot rely on past experiences of cooperation, they will update their expectations about the future behavior of others based on their current experiences. In other words, the *process* of dissociation is not only significant for how the dissociation conflicts themselves are resolved. Rather, it will also affect future conflicts. A highly adversarial

dissociation process will prime actors to expect similar problems in the future and thus make it more difficult to resolve future conflicts in cooperative fashion. Through this mechanism, dissociation in one policy field might create ripple effects and negative spill-back in other policy fields.

Overall, this can lead to a rise of tensions in the relations between the states concerned. Research on interstate peace and conflict has developed the notion that the relationship between two states can be characterized as more or less tense. This rests on the insight that “war” and “peace” as categories are too broad to describe interstate relations. In between the two extremes lie variable levels of “tensions” (Singer 1958; Osgood 1962; Holsti 1963), which Snyder und Diesing (1977, 15) define as “intensity of conflict behaviour.” It is this overall quality of interstate relations that can be affected by dissociation conflicts. If states view each other increasingly as uncooperative and unreliable due to the mechanisms discussed above, their overall relationship will suffer and become more and more tense. The pathways along which tensions rise can be gleaned from research that examines how states move from peace to war. According to John Vasquez (1996, 2000), rising tensions become visible in three dimensions. First, states increasingly see the other as a security threat and rival. Second, they increasingly resort to unilateral strategies and tactics of intimidation and the application of pressure. And third, relations polarize more and more so that increasing conflict behavior in one policy field displaces cooperation in other fields, eventually leading to the emergence of an overarching antagonistic situation.

4. Dissociation and Interstate Conflict: Guiding Questions

These reflections can be summarized in a set of guiding questions for analyzing dissociation processes and teasing out their effects on interstate relations. At the heart of these questions lies the basic hypothesis that dissociation processes that are treated mainly as ideational conflicts will be more likely to produce rising tensions between the states involved than those that are treated as distributional conflicts.

An analysis along these lines needs to look at 1) the types of conflicts that dominate the dissociation process; 2) the rise and fall of tensions in interstate relations; and 3) the linkages between these two. Thus, our discussion above can be translated in three sets of questions.

1. What type of conflict dominates the dissociation process?

To answer this question, studies need to identify the main conflict issues that animate interactions between exiting and remaining states with respect to

dissociation. As we consider dissociation conflicts primarily as intergovernmental affairs, debates and negotiations between governments are the primary locus for this type of analysis. Indications for distributional conflicts are debates that center on the exiting states' contribution to public goods created through the institutionalized cooperation. They center on questions of compensations and future material commitments. Ideational conflicts, in contrast, would center on controversies about the values enshrined in the institution itself and in the wider order to which the institution contributed. Conceptions of the cause of dissociation can be useful indicators here. Did dissociation occur because the state in question was dissatisfied with the distributive effects of the institution or because of disagreements about values? Are there any underlying shifts or changes in the institution or the state concerned that might indicate a change in distributive effects or the emergence of an ideational chasm?

The conflict structure may be complicated in several respects and these complications might amplify its repercussions on wider interstate relations. For one, distributional and ideational conflicts are likely to co-occur, which makes it necessary to look for their overall balance or identify a conflict that shapes the overall interaction in the dissociation process. Secondly, domestic groups will intervene in the conflict. This will make it necessary to examine which groups' intervention was taken up by the government and whether and how this changed the overall conflict structure.

2. How did the tensions between the dissociating state and (key) remaining states develop?

In other words, did the relations between the states in question move along the spectrum between peace and war and, if so, in which direction? It is obvious that this is a question about the *relative* change in the quality of the relationship. Some relations will already be rather tense, and dissociation might push them dangerously close towards the use of force. Others will be rather relaxed, and while dissociation could make them more tense, it is unlikely that they will move anywhere close to the war end of the tension spectrum. According to the research presented above, indications of rising tensions can be found in three dimensions.

- Perceptions: States can view each other as partner, competitor, strategic rival, or enemy. Such changes will be difficult to ascertain empirically, however.
- Behavior: States may cooperate peacefully, refuse to cooperate, threaten each other with different degrees of sanctions or different forms of force, and they may actually use sanctions or force to varying degrees. Besides tracing the development of conflicts by qualitatively analyzing the interactions between the conflict parties, tools for assessing changes in conflict behavior include the analysis of event-data

(Schrodt 1995) and data on the frequency and intensity of conflicts (Brecher and Wilkenfeld 1997; Brecher et al. 2017).

- Polarization of relationship structure: States may view their interactions in different policy areas as largely independent of one another. However, their relations may also become polarized to varying degrees, so that they become increasingly subordinate to one underlying conflict. Polarization can be assessed by analyzing negative linkage strategies and patterns of cooperative behavior across policy fields.

3. Is it possible to trace the development of interstate tensions back to the dissociation conflicts?

This is the key question for examining the causal link between the type of dissociation conflict and the quality of interstate relations. Foreign policy analysis and international relations scholars have developed “process tracing” as an approach to establishing linkages between causes and effects in individual case studies (George and Bennett 2005; Beach and Pedersen 2019). It is similar to the careful historical study of the unfolding of events (Bennett and George 2001). By identifying intermediate steps in the process, it explores whether there is a direct process running from some cause (the type of dissociation conflict) to its hypothesized effect (rising tensions). A key process in our case runs through the leading actors who translate their experience in the dissociation process to interactions in the future and in other policy fields. The most straightforward indicator for the effect of dissociation conflicts would lie in references to dissociation when actors give reasons for other policy decisions. For example, governments may justify the polarization of relations by saying that another state can no longer be trusted because of dissociation, or they may justify confrontational behavior as retaliation for the exiting state no longer fulfilling its obligations. More indirect indicators could be that actors transfer arguments (for example about a fundamental difference in values) from the dissociation conflict to other policy areas.

It may not always be possible to rely on such clear-cut indicators. Studies of dissociation conflicts can also revert to more indirect causal reasoning employing approaches that both historians and social scientists have in their respective toolboxes. Longitudinal comparisons, for example, can examine whether changes in the dissociation process were followed by the expected changes in the level of tensions between the states. Counterfactual reasoning (Tetlock and Belkin 1996; Nolan 2013) can be employed to examine whether the relationship would have evolved differently in the absence of dissociation. And, finally, studies can consider alternative explanations for the development of interstate tensions. If they are found wanting, this can also be considered an indication that the hypothesized link between dissociation conflicts and interstate tensions actually exists.

5. Five Cases of Dissociation

The remainder of this forum is devoted to the analysis of five cases of dissociation. They are intensive studies of the respective dissociation process written by experts on the topic. We have brought together historians and political scientists because our central interest in how relations between states developed after dissociation in light of their past experiences with each other is shared by both disciplines. The contributions to the forum show how both disciplines can contribute to the study of dissociation. Each study is designed as an explorative study of the link between the way in which the key parties handled the dissociation process and the impact this had on the level of tensions between the two sides. Taken together, these studies present us with the opportunity to present first findings about our basic hypothesis and the framework for analysis we presented above.

The five cases that are examined in detail in this forum are: Iran's dissociation from the West in the late 1970s (Bösch and Walter 2022); East Germany's exit from the Warsaw Pact in 1989/90 (Maslanka 2022); Russia's dissociation from European security arrangements since the 2000s (Polianskii 2022); China's creation of alternative institutions in the global financial architecture since the 2000s (Chu 2022); and the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union since 2016 (Peters 2022). These cases have been selected to represent a wide range of instances that allow us to assess the impact of dissociation across the full spectrum of dissociation types, from formal and open disengagement (Brexit, Iran, East Germany) over non-compliance (Russia) to building alternative institutions while remaining formally committed to existing ones (China). They also cover different types of institutions, ranging from the strictly formalized (EU) to the less formal (the West), covering the key areas of international politics: security, economics, and rule. Finally, the contributions discuss cases from different historical contexts. We have been careful to consider only cases in which the ideational dimension touches on the relationship of the states involved to liberal values in the broadest sense, and which thus address the core problem of the contemporary institutional crisis. However, we include cases from the late 1970s to the present, spanning more than 40 years of dissociation experiences.

What they all have in common, however, is their political relevance. They were all considered important by the states involved. We thus ignore cases in which, for example, the parties shrugged off the withdrawal of smaller states or an organization was already considered moribund. Our conclusions are therefore limited to controversial cases, as these pose the greatest risk to interstate relations.

The study of Iranian-Western relations by *Frank Bösch* and *Daniel Walter* reconsiders the case of a rather disruptive dissociation from a weakly

institutionalized order. Under the Shah, Iran had become a central partner of the West in the Middle East and linked to the US and to European states via significant political, economic, and institutional ties. The 1979 revolution and the creation of the Islamic Republic marked a harsh break with Iran's traditional domestic politics and international relations. This rupture left deep scars and poisoned relations, especially with the US, for years to come. During the dissociation, both sides emphasized the ideational dimension of their conflict. This finding lends support to the central hypothesis of this project that the foregrounding of ideational issues leads to high levels of tension between leaving and remaining states in the post-dissociation period.

However, the paper also highlights interesting differences in Iran's relations with the US and with European states such as Germany after 1979. In its relations with Germany, the Islamic Republic showed a remarkable readiness to embrace revolutionary pragmatism and maintained much higher levels of economic and diplomatic relations for a surprisingly long period of time. The article also shows that a constructive management of the dissociation was hampered by linkages between international dynamics and domestic frames and politics. On the Iranian side, the close alignment of the Shah's domestic modernization program with its international Western orientation in the pre-1979 period resurfaced in the years between 1979–1982 in form of a strong link between a domestic program of Islamic restoration and anti-Western orientations. As Bösch and Walter note, the most dramatic instances of anti-Western actions like the hostage taking "can only be understood through the lens of revolutionary elite infighting." On the US side, too, calls for revenge and established Cold War frames impeded a more pragmatic response to the Iranian challenge.

Susanna Maslanka's study of the withdrawal of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) from the Warsaw Pact analyses the dissociation from and the subsequent collapse of a highly institutionalized and formalized organization. At first glance, the GDR's dissociation appears as a success story. Even though the stakes were high and both security issues and the status of the USSR as a great power were directly affected, this process proceeded peacefully and relatively smoothly. Relations in the post-dissociation period between the USSR/Russia and the Federal Republic of Germany, which acted as a custodian of the GDR and negotiated the terms of the dissociation, remained close and friendly. Susanna Maslanka identifies the foregrounding of material issues as the main reason why ruptures in the bilateral relations could be avoided. In fact, the negotiations on the dissociation of the GDR from the Warsaw Pact and its unification with West Germany focused on economic compensations and military restrictions that the enlarged Germany would accept in order to stay within NATO. But in this case, too, international and domestic dynamics interacted, and the smoothness of the international negotiations came at the expense of domestic frictions within the USSR. In the

negotiations with his Western partners, President Gorbachev effectively sidelined his domestic critics. Although the coup d'état by hardline communists failed, the critique of Gorbachev's concessions and purported giveaways continued and burdened the democratization and liberalization process in Russia.

In many ways, *Mikhail Polianskii's* study of the dissociation of Russia from a pan-European security order is a continuation of Susanna Maslanka's story. Even before the collapse of the USSR, the members of the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) responded positively to Gorbachev's central demand by signing the 1990 Charter of Paris as the foundation of a new pan-European order and elevating the CSCE into the well-endowed Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). After the collapse of the USSR, Russia also joined other formerly Western organizations like the Council of Europe and the G-7 and developed close and institutionalized relations with NATO and the EU. By joining this order, Russia hoped to gain voice over security issues in Europe as well as respect as a renewed Great Power that stretches over two continents. However, the Janus-faced Paris order was lopsided from the beginning. Its character as a collective security order remained weak, and its character as a liberal social order became more pronounced. Thus, Russia's place within this order depended on its successful democratic transformation as well as its willingness to accept the status of one power among others. As Russia's democratic transformation stalled and as rising energy prices as well as a reconstitution of the Russian state fed its aspirations, Russia's place within this order became increasingly untenable. Mikhail Polianskii describes Russia's unsuccessful attempts to reform this order and the subsequent signs that Russia was about to leave it, such as President Putin's Munich speech in 2007. However, its departure did not begin in earnest until Putin, upon his return to the Presidency in 2012, started to build alternative organizations to compete with and prevent the planned enlargement of EU and NATO. The annexation of Crimea and the support of the separatists in the Donbas region marked the violent finale of this process. Although the dissociation concerned material issues, both sides emphasized the ideational dimension of their conflict. In fact, mutual accusations of betrayal, broken promises, and double standards dominate the discourse to this day.

Dissociation entails the possibility that both sides reorganize their relations on the basis of a new normative foundation that corresponds with their interests and their differences. After the escalation of tensions in 2014, and in line with this assumption, influential players on both sides did indeed try to isolate deeply contested issues such as the status of Crimea and shield areas of common interests from being absorbed by the overall conflict dynamics. Mikhail Polianskii reconsiders these attempts and their eventual failure. He does not endeavor to explain Putin's decision to go to war in February 2022. Instead, he tries to explain why a re-launch of Russian-Western relations

failed and why tensions remained high. Although he recognizes that the chaotic and violent dissociation as well as the multitude of actors with different and competing interests have made it difficult to rebuild constructive relations, he identifies the unresolved legacies of the dissociation process as the main reason for this failure. Continued hostility and a desire for revenge on the Russian side and an adherence to the old normative standards of equal sovereignty and the right to choose alliances on the Western side interacted and prevented a restart of the relations based on the principles of coexistence.

Sinan Chu's study of the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the conflict between the US and China examines a case of dissociation via alternative institution building. More specifically, Sinan Chu describes the creation of the AIIB by China as the story of a *perceived* dissociation. The founding of the AIIB in the years 2013 to 2016 was embedded in the overall deterioration of US-China relations. By that time, US expectations that the integration of China into the existing global order would make it a responsible stakeholder of this order had already been dashed. Instead, the Obama administration perceived China as a challenger and a threat and reacted with its "pivot to Asia." Against the backdrop of this structural rivalry, the US perceived China's early steps towards the founding of the bank as an attempt to challenge the existing rules of the global financial architecture represented by the Washington-based World Bank. In an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of the Chinese project, the Obama administration lobbied against the AIIB and asked its G-7 partners and other countries not to join. When Chinese representatives reassured prospective partners and the US that the new bank would operate within the existing global system, the American resistance strategy ran aground. Eventually, most of its partners (with the exception of Japan) joined the AIIB as founding members. Sinan Chu shows that the US has been more concerned with the ideational challenges posed by the AIIB than the material ones. Although the AIIB did not challenge the rules of the existing order, this episode nevertheless increased tensions between China and the US. Moreover, although both sides managed this conflict rather well, the experience did not exert positive influence on the overall conflict.

Finally, Brexit differs from the cases discussed so far in two important respects. The UK's decision to withdraw from cooperation was not based on a strategic or deep ideological conflict between the UK and other EU members. Moreover, as *Dirk Peters* points out in his study of Brexit, it was a negotiated dissociation. The withdrawal took place through formalized negotiations between the two sides and ended with a legal framework for post-exit relations that both sides agreed to. But even in this case, conflicts during dissociation affected post-exit relations. Part of the problem with negotiated dissociations like Brexit is that negotiations not only provide an opportunity to discuss and

resolve conflicts. They can also exacerbate conflict and even create new opportunities for conflict, namely in the implementation of the exit agreement. Using the conflict over the Northern Ireland Protocol as his focus, Peters demonstrates how conflict in the negotiation phase complicated the implementation of the Withdrawal Agreement, as the experience of previous conflict episodes influenced the parties' subsequent handling of conflict. Both sides increasingly accused each other of not adhering to basic norms of international conduct, in particular of negotiating in bad faith, which posed a serious obstacle to further cooperation. While escalation was repeatedly prevented, not least by the multitude of other institutional linkages between the UK and EU member states, Brexit was clearly not an amicable divorce and left scars that have already affected the implementation of the agreements and will likely continue to do so in the future.

This study highlights the importance of domestic politics for dissociation processes and their consequences too. The deterioration of relations between the UK and EU member states happened despite the fact that the protagonists' stated goal from the beginning was that Brexit should not affect their relations. What made it so difficult to escape the conflicts were British domestic politics and the organizational dynamics of the EU. In the UK, hard core Brexiters in the Conservative Party had achieved a veto position, which they used strategically to undermine the deal with the EU and gain strength in the UK government. On the EU side, the goal of organizational survival made it imperative not to create incentives for future departures and thus not to be too accommodating to the UK.

6. Conclusions from the HSR Forum

What lessons can be drawn from the five studies and what avenues do they suggest for future research? The initial research question of this HSR Forum was whether and how the management of dissociation processes affects post-dissociation relations between leaving and remaining states. We hypothesized that the process of dissociation could lead to enhanced levels of tensions, particularly if the dissociation in question is understood by the parties involved to reflect an ideational conflict.

Our case studies show that dissociation, at least in the politically sensitive cases we have studied, is indeed often associated with high levels of tensions. Iran's dissociation from the Western social order and Russia's dissociation from the pan-European security order led to a breakdown of relations, resulted in high levels of tensions, and even led to bloody conflicts. Brexit, too, strained relations between the UK and EU members, although in this case the conditions had been rather favorable for a smooth transition. There are only some rather slim silver linings. The dissociation of the GDR from the Warsaw

Pact, for example, proceeded without major frictions. But even here, dissociation aggravated elite conflicts in the Soviet Union and these conflicts would later play a major role in the conflict between Russia and the West.

Why does dissociation so often result in heightened levels of tension? Our cases point to at least three mechanisms through which dissociation exacerbates tensions.

First, dissociation is often linked to broader strategic or ideological conflicts between the states involved and it can reinforce or exacerbate these conflicts. Sometimes dissociation might be secondary to these broader conflicts, so that its management has little lasting significance for the tensions between the parties. As Sinan Chu argues, the US-China conflict appears to be such a case. Although both sides eventually managed their dispute over the meaning and implications of China's new development bank, this experience had little long-term resonance because it did not positively influence the policy of the incoming Trump administration. However, other cases suggest that the management of the dissociation process can contribute to the overall level of tensions between the conflict parties in the long term. Iranian dissociation is one such case. The study by Frank Bösch and Daniel Walter highlights the differences in Iranian-US and Iranian-German relations that suggest Iran would have been able to show revolutionary pragmatism in its relations with the US as well, had it not been for the scars left by the association/dissociation process. Mikhail Polianskii's contribution lends further support to the argument that structural conflicts can be aggravated to a significant degree by the dissociation process. He shows that both Russia and Western states missed possible compromises because the failed association and the dynamics of the dissociation prevented them from seizing these opportunities.

Second, dissociation highlights and sometimes creates ideational and material conflicts between leaving and remaining states, and this results in rising tensions. Although we often find a complex mix of ideational and material issues, the cases support our basic hypothesis that disputes are more difficult to resolve and more likely to lead to higher levels of tensions when the parties emphasize ideational issues. In one of our cases – the dissociation of the GDR – states emphasized material issues and here the level of tensions remained comparatively low. In the Brexit case, the more conflicts were framed as ideational, the more difficult cooperation became. In the other cases the parties consistently emphasized ideational issues. In all three cases, we observe moderate or even high levels of tension during and after the dissociation.

One explanation lies in the fact that when parties emphasize material issues, they still implicitly operate on the basis of more or less shared normative beliefs. As part of a shared social community whose norms serve as yardsticks for appropriate and inappropriate behavior and stabilize expectations, states are more easily able to manage dissociation and resolve distributional conflicts. The case study on the GDR's exit from the Warsaw Pact shows that

the forging of a pan-European order was a crucial precondition for the smooth transition of the GDR out of the Warsaw Pact and the continued membership of united Germany within NATO. And the fact that escalation was ultimately prevented in each episode of the Brexit conflict has much to do with the fact that there were shared normative beliefs between the UK and EU member states, which are apparent in their myriad institutional linkages outside the EU.

In contrast, when states emphasize ideational issues during the dissociation, they put into question the wider social order that had hitherto provided stability and a sense of security. Resolving distributional conflicts in the ensuing situation of unpredictability and insecurity is more difficult. As hypothesized, the relations between leaving and remaining states in our other three cases are characterized by higher levels of insecurity and unpredictability.

Our cases also suggest an additional pathway through which ideational conflict links dissociation and increasing tensions. Remaining states remain committed to the norms of the “old” order, which prevents them from coming to an understanding with the dissociated states. The contributions on Russia and Iran illustrate this problem. In both cases it was very difficult for the remaining states and the states that left the failed social order to agree on a new set of shared norms and rules because the dynamics of the dissociation process itself strained future relations. In both cases, remaining states found it very difficult to agree to a new set of norms because, in their view, the norms of the old order were still valid. Norms are not easily abolished because they are regarded as valid by the remaining states and because they constitute the identity of their community. In the case of Russia’s dissociation, Western states upheld the principle of NATO’s open-door policy even though the red lines that Russia had clearly communicated underlined the high risks and low chances of success of this policy. Consequently, the remaining states either attempted to bring the departing state back into the order, as in the futile attempt to bring the increasingly authoritarian state of Russia back into the Council of Europe, or they perceived the move away from this order as betrayal and the leaving state as traitor. Eventually, the view of dissociation as betrayal prevailed in both cases.

In contrast, both leaving states explicitly rejected the norms of the old order. They justified the dissociation by claiming that the old order was biased and against their true interests and portrayed the remaining states as exploitative actors. Iran’s new revolutionary leadership castigated the old order and the foreign and domestic actors, portraying it as a structure designed to exploit and alienate Iran from its true allegiances. Russian leaders consistently criticized what they perceived as double standards and accused the West of using the social order to keep Russia down. This persistent sense of exploitation and injustice, coupled with the perception of the remaining states as self-serving actors, made it difficult to agree on a new institutional order.

Third, we find ample empirical evidence for our assumption that the management of dissociation may be further complicated or even hampered by domestic disputes. In fact, in all our cases except the China case, the management of dissociation was closely entangled with internal conflicts among domestic actors who demanded a fast and far-reaching process of dissociation and others who stood to lose and sought protection or attempted to limit the pace and scope of dissociation. Our case studies suggest different strategies governments may choose in order to respond to such two-level games. In the case of the GDR, Gorbachev gave precedence to the international level. In order to achieve a smooth dissociation, he sidelined his domestic opponents at the cost of risking a backlash on the domestic level. In the case of Brexit, the British government and the EU showed more consideration for their domestic constituencies, which made it exceedingly difficult to reach agreement on the international level. In the cases of Russia's dissociation from a pan-European order and Iran's dissociation from a Western order, the nexus between the management of dissociation on the international level and domestic conflicts was even more complicated. During the process of dissociation, Putin had isolated and sanctioned domestic proponents of a Western orientation. In fact, the early phase of dissociation went hand-in-hand with an aggravation of the authoritarian character of Putin's rule and a replacement of the visions of a return to Europe with nationalist and Eurasian ideologies. This dislocation of proponents of Russia's Western integration, however, diminished the chances of overcoming the dissociation at a later stage when the increasingly dominant nationalist, anti-Western Eurasian sentiments impeded the implementation of a possible post-2014 rapprochement. During the hostage crisis in Iran, Ayatollah Chomeini sided with the radical elements at the expense of a more constructive dissociation and pragmatic relations with the US in the future, probably expecting that high levels of external tensions would marginalize the more moderate groups within Iran.

To summarize, we find that (a) dissociation and structural conflict often go hand-in-hand but that structural conflicts do not determine the process of dissociation; (b) an emphasis on ideational conflict issues makes a smooth management of dissociation more difficult because it reduces predictability and because the perception of the other as a traitor or exploiter impedes the agreement on a new set of norms; and (c) dissociation and internal conflict dynamics are often intertwined, making compromises on the international level more difficult.

Given the prospect that dissociation is likely to become more widespread in the coming period of de-globalization, further research is urgently needed. Our explorative study has provided a first entry point into this largely unexplored area. Empirically, future research should map all cases of dissociation and especially identify cooperative cases of separation where relations between leaving and remaining states remained on a friendly basis.

Theoretically, it should refine hypotheses on those causal mechanisms that lead to higher or lower levels of tensions during and after dissociation. The research presented in this forum suggests that especially the role of two-level dynamics and of ideational conflicts over norms deserve further investigation.

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