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INTRODUCTION

The power of the "weak" and international organizations

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Abstract

By nearly every measure, power in the international system is concentrated, meaning that most states lack significant power resources. And yet international relations theory tends to focus on the behavior of great powers. This special issue instead explores the strategies that "weak" states use in the context of international organizations both to advance their interests and to resist pressure from stronger states. We define weakness as a relative lack of power across one or more dimensions. While the literature, to the extent it has focused on weak actors, has too often defined weakness solely in material terms, we adopt a broader conception that builds on the influential typology of power by Barnett and Duvall (Barnett and Duvall, 2005a, Barnett and Duvall, *International Organization 59*, 39–75, 2005b). A multidimensional conceptualization of power allows analysts to show how actors that are weak in one dimension (often material power) may be stronger on other dimensions, giving them greater capacity for action than is often recognized. From this framework we create a typology of "strategies of the weak" that emphasizes the agency of weaker actors to make the most of their positions. The contributions to the special issue, summarized here, illuminate and substantiate many of these strategies across a diverse range of international organizations, understood as both forums and actors. As the articles show, these alternative theoretical mechanisms help explain how and why *seemingly* weak states sometimes fare better than a simplistic assessment of their material capabilities might suggest. By deepening our understanding of weakness and how it influences state behavior, the volume advances our theoretical understanding of how power is built, wielded, and resisted in and through international organization.

Keywords Weak actors · Power · Institutional power · Strategies of the weak · International organizations

To what extent do "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must," as the Athenian commanders famously told the city of Melos before obliterating it

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during the Peloponnesian War? If the study of international politics were no more than describing who is more powerful, and consequently, who gets what, it would be a simple science indeed. However, power can be accumulated and wielded in many diverse ways. States and other actors in world politics can be strong or weak in different respects, in different contexts, vis-a-vis different issues, and at different times. Significantly, what states do with their power – their agency – matters immensely.

Take for instance the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Most observers expected a quick war because of Ukraine's seemingly inferior military power vis-a-vis Russia. But Ukraine's resolve and communications strategies in the early days of the war helped it to secure allies and achieve military outcomes far beyond what most experts initially thought possible. Similarly, although Melos was destroyed in the Peloponnesian War, ultimately the weaker military power, Sparta, came to defeat mighty Athens. Why?

This special issue takes the Melian perspective. Our goal is to understand how the supposedly weak can exert influence in the context of international organizations (IOs) and shape outcomes even when the odds seem stacked against them. We are hoping for a better ending.

While weakness often has a pejorative connotation – indeed, the Athenians treat the Melians with contempt – here we use it simply to mean a relative lack of power. However, this definition begs as many questions as it answers since there are many ways to understand power in international relations: as resources and capacities (material, ideational, etc.), as a relational property, as a social structure, or in terms of the outcomes actors do or do not achieve. To encompass the many different types of power that shape relations among states, we build on the influential framework introduced by Barnett and Duvall (2005a, b), who propose a typology of four types of power (see below), but other conceptualizations are possible. Our interest is not to contest the definition(s) of power, but rather to theorize the implications of possessing alternative types of power to explore what strategies are possible for actors that, on the face of it, appear weak.

We investigate the multiple ways in which actors that lack, for example, the ability to coerce through material resources might nonetheless possess some degree of agency to shape outcomes, either by making things happen or by blocking things from happening. This perspective leads us to ask what constitutes power, how it is gained or lost, how it ebbs or flows across different contexts, and, critically, *how it is shaped by different strategies*. In other words, our focus is on the agency of those who are presumed to lack power. As James Scott showed in his influential *Weapons of the Weak*, even peasants who lack anything resembling formal political power can sometimes shape outcomes and constrain the powerful (Scott 2000). Our premise in this special issue is analogous. To the extent that agency influences outcomes, it forces us to reconsider who is powerful and who is not, regardless of how we define power. Although our approach is equally relevant to other seemingly weak actors (e.g., non-governmental organizations and public-private partnerships), the primary focus of this special issue is on *the strategies that seemingly weak states use in the context of IOs*.

We start from the observation that, no matter its definition, power is distributed very unequally among states in the global system. Consider a simple material

definition of power focused on economic production, frequently used by most international relations scholars, ranging from IR-realists to critical theorists. The top four countries (the US, China, Japan, and Germany) account for over 50% of global GDP and the top fifteen account for over 75% of global GDP (World Bank 2023). The distribution of military capacity is even more asymmetric.

Correspondingly, most states are, at least in material terms, weak(er) states. Of the nearly two hundred states in the international system, only six have even one-tenth of the GDP of the United States. Over three-quarters of states have a GDP less than one-hundredth the size of the US economy (World Bank 2023). This high asymmetry in the international system creates an imperative to understand how materially deprived states can navigate their situation, which would be a less pressing concern if resources were distributed more evenly.

And yet, international relations scholarship has focused traditionally on 'great powers' defined essentially in material terms as states with large militaries and economies (e.g., Long 2022). This focus, in part, reflects the field's origins in the study of the history and foreign policy of Europe and North America, and the fact that the preponderance of scholars, journals, and departments have been based in the Global North and worked from that perspective. In this way, the study of international relations itself mirrors the power asymmetry of its subject matter; perspectives from materially deprived states have been systematically undervalued in the core of the discipline (Tickner Wæver, 2009; Acharya and Buzan 2009; 2017). More theoretically, scholars have justified focusing on the larger powers because they exert more influence on the international system, and so we need to understand their behavior to understand the world overall. But this of course risks tautology. If we only study certain states because they matter *by definition*, what questions are we not asking and how much of the picture are we missing? Focusing too much on the materially powerful risks both empirical and theoretical myopia. In this special issue we are therefore interested primarily in those states that, by conventional understandings of power, would seem to lack influence in the international system.

Of course, material capacity is only one dimension of power. The literature also shows how human capital, state capacity, technology, cultural outputs, norms, world views, diplomatic networks, or institutional positions can also be sources of power. Many of these are also relatively concentrated, and often, though not always, correlated with material power. Any theoretical treatment of weakness needs to consider how these multiple dimensions are distributed, and especially the extent to which the distributions of different power resources reinforce or crosscut one another.

Because we wish to include multiple conceptions of power, and because, following foundational ideas in international relations theory, we see the concept of power as fundamentally continuous and relative (all states are somewhere on a spectrum from strong to weak across multiple dimensions of power), we do not see weakness as a fixed category that states either are or are not. But at the same time, we recognize that many, perhaps most, states share a basket of similar features that lead them to be perceived as weak. These can include small economies and low levels of development, undiversified economies and a lack of key technologies, limited foreign policy and diplomatic capacity, a lack of autonomous and well-functioning bureaucracies, a lack of elite consensus or popular

legitimacy around state institutions, dependencies on foreign powers, limited cultural exports, and so forth. Many of these features relate to the international system, particularly the legacies of colonialism and the structure of the world economy. As a consequence, such states are likely to be, on average, disadvantaged in their relations with other states, less able to accomplish their foreign policy objectives, and vulnerable to the exercise of influence by others.

There is, of course, great variation among seemingly weak states. The so-called "rising powers" are states which have gained significant elements of power, especially on the economic front, yet may still be weak in other respects. The fact that rising powers often seek to retain their "weak power" identity, for example by arguing that they remain in the process of development in the World Trade Organization (WTO) in order to avoid certain requirements, suggests that being perceived or categorized as "weak" may have certain advantages in international politics. At the other extreme, some states are so weak in every respect that they may have very little capacity to leverage their position. Finally, by focusing on states in the context of IOs, the special issue does not speak to those groups that perhaps most lack power in the international system, such as stateless peoples, refugees, or marginalized groups within states. These groups are also able to partake of similar strategies in some circumstances.

It is important to begin with a general understanding of types of power. But determining who has power in any given situation requires contextualization. We need to analyze power and weakness relative to specific objectives and prevailing circumstances to assess how an actor can achieve its goals. We further need to consider how alternative forms of power combine and manifest around a particular context. Even normally, "powerful" states can be weak in a particular situation. For example, a superpower may struggle to impose its preferred political order on another country, even if that country is weak by most measures of power. And "middle powers" are often weak when they deal with "great powers," but strong when they act as regional hegemons. Similarly, states have comparative advantages and disadvantages across the different types of power, depending on whom they are engaging. This means that the same state may use "strong state" strategies in one context and "weak state" strategies in another.

When applied to specific contexts, general theories of power become less dispositive, as much may depend on the agency and strategies of both weak and strong actors. Actors that are seemingly weak may, through their actions or strategies, reveal themselves to be less so, problematising the concept of weakness (and therefore power as well). Time is also a key dimension, as those that are powerful or weak in one period may change in the next, or powerful actors may turn out to have less resolve or endurance than weaker actors, who may then triumph in the end (Drezner 2021). When the analyst passes from general definitions of power and its distribution to specific instances of its application, defining who is weak and who is strong also becomes more complex (cf. Keohane 1969). A goal of this special issue is to elucidate this theoretical grey area. Considering the strategies of the (seemingly) "weak" can thereby shed light on the core question of international politics: how power is defined and distributed.

There have been many studies not only of the problems the weak have in international politics but also of their occasional ability to overcome certain types of weakness and be more effective (e.g. Fox 1959; Zartman and Rubin 2000; Narlikar 2003; 2011; Odell 2010; Thorhallsson 2018). For example, a common approach is to describe how an actor that is weak on one dimension (e.g. military capability) can use its power on another dimension (e.g. economic capacity) to triumph over a seemingly more powerful entity in some circumstances. However, the resulting literature is scattered, so another objective is to bring it together systematically under a common theoretical framework. By defining weakness as the absence of different types of power, we locate empirical cases of weakness in terms of different theoretical approaches to power and link strategies of the "weak" to prior questions of how power and weakness are defined. The result is a conceptual typology of strategies by which the weak augment and use their power in international relations.

Our approach in this introductory article is to combine an inductive analysis of the power of the weak with a deductive typology of power, seeking to understand states' strategies comprehensively. Inductively, we draw from the cases included in this project and from the international relations literature more generally. Deductively, we mobilize the broad theoretical literature on different conceptions of power, beginning with Barnett and Duvall's seminal work, but augmenting it with other conceptions of power that may fall within their framework but are not highlighted by it, such as soft power or network power.

While this typology of power encompasses both institutionalized and non-institutionalized settings, we focus our empirical scope on the ways in which IOs, specifically, shape the possibilities for the seemingly weak to gain and wield power. We argue that while power shifts can occur for other reasons, institutions such as IOs are central means by which states that are weak in one or several dimensions can augment and wield their power. The resulting 'power of the weak' can either create positive outcomes for the seemingly weak or block negative outcomes from being imposed upon them. We discuss IOs as both forums and agents through which actors pursue their strategies.

We certainly do not claim that IO-focused strategies are the only way by which materially deprived or otherwise weak states "defeat" the powerful in the sense of generating outcomes that the weak prefer and which the strong oppose. However, the articles in this special issue show clearly that analysts need to consider how seemingly weak states act in the context of IOs to understand their agency to shape, resist or block the designs of powerful actors.

The substantive papers in this special issue explore these dynamics. Lauren Ferry and Alexandra Zeitz (2024) show how diplomatic and financial connectivity to creditors gives borrowers greater leverage in IMF negotiations. The papers by Katherine Beall (2024) and by Susanna Campbell and Aila Matanock (2024) show how weaker states can shift the rules of certain IOs to advance their interests, focusing on the cases of trade and human rights and post-conflict reconstruction, respectively. Similarly, Andrew Lugg (2024) shows how weak states can use linked intergovernmental organizations (LIGOs) to alter the institutional status quo and re-contract their cooperation. Julia Morse and Bridget Coggins (2024) look instead at how weaker states can strategically absent themselves from IOs when they face

countervailing pressures from "great powers," choosing simply not to show up to UN General Assembly votes when they are likely to be punished for voting against some powerful country. Finally, two papers explore the ability of less powerful states to leverage their diplomatic networks to punch above their weight. Michael Manulak (2024) shows how a middle power like Canada can use diplomatic ties unavailable to its more powerful allies to advance its goals, despite a relative lack of material power. Rafael Mesquita (2024), in turn, shows how Cuba, a small state facing strong pressure from the United States, has been able to leverage its brokering role in the United Nations to build coalitions that help it resist pressure for change.

In sum, we define weakness as the inverse of power. We highlight the different types of power and, thus, different types of weakness states may possess. We focus our attention on the agency of those states that lack power on some dimension, primarily the material one. Contrary to the common view that seemingly weak actors have no leverage in international politics, we show that these states sometimes have strategies available to them that, to an extent, offset different types of power disadvantages. Some of these are unique to their situation of weakness; others draw on states' comparative advantages and entail addressing weakness in one respect with strategies based on alternative forms of power. By theorising and emphasising weakness (instead of strength) in terms of different conceptions of power (and interactions among them), and by focusing on the strategies of seemingly weak actors, the special issue aims to deepen our understanding of state behavior in IOs.

1 IOs as Forums and Actors

Institutions themselves can be understood (in part) as arrangements among powerful and weak states whereby the former accept rules that constrain their power in return for the weak accepting rules that allow the powerful to achieve (some of) their goals without the more costly exercise of overt power (e.g. Mikulaschek 2016). From the perspective of weak states, the institutional arrangement may be preferable to facing the immediate consequences of overt power and, because the rules create a stable setting, may also provide a route for the weak to improve their situation over time (Abbott & Snidal 1998; Axelrod & Keohane 1985). Conversely, however, institutional rules might provide a means for the powerful to maintain or even increase their dominance over time. So there is nothing inherently advantageous about institutions from the perspective of the weak – it all depends on how the institutions are used and by whom.

To analyze how IOs shape the strategies of the weak, we need to understand them in two ways: IOs as forums and IOs as actors.

IOs as forums provide a structured meeting place for states and other actors (cf. Milewicz and Goodin 2018). The rules of the IO shape how it operates as a forum. Such rules specify, for example, who can participate (which states, and which other actors), what issues are dealt with (e.g., the WTO covers trade but not labor rights), and the rules of procedure and voting (e.g., are decisions by consensus or by weighted voting). Furthermore, the rules shape the nature of agreements in terms of

both content and form (e.g., *pacta sunt servanda* if the agreements are legal or made in legalized IOs).

More concretely, IOs as forums provide a public setting in which states negotiate, form coalitions, make commitments, and sometimes hold the powerful to account in terms of principles and values. Although the forum aspects of IOs are highly member-driven, they shape the nature of interactions in ways that are different from what would occur in a "rule-free setting" or under "pure anarchy." Prevailing IO rules often reflect the strength of the powerful but can also provide opportunities for the weak to assert and increase their power over time.

IOs as actors recognizes that IOs are bureaucracies and, as such, have some independent capacities for operational activities, agenda-setting, information collection and monitoring, adjudication and promoting enforcement. Like states, IOs can be weaker or stronger and are typically interested in becoming stronger to better pursue their objectives. If they are strong, they might ally with others and work on behalf of the weak or the strong.

While IOs as forums have a passive role in shaping outcomes, as actors they take on an active role. IOs often combine forum and actor elements, with relative importance varying across IOs as well as within IOs across issues. The European Union (EU), for example, functions both as an actor and as a forum in coordinating the adoption of economic sanctions by its member states. The EU's Commission (*actor*) drafts sanction packages that are then proposed to the EU's Council (*forum*), where member states must unanimously accept the proposal for it to enter into force. This rule of unanimity gives power to EU member states that would be considered weak in other circumstances because they can threaten to veto any proposal as a strategy of defending their interests and/or extracting concessions from stronger member states and the EU itself. More generally, strategies of the weak include not only "positive power" to do things but also "negative" power to offset vulnerability, resist the powerful and promote counter-narratives.

2 A typology of strategies of the weak

Our typology builds off Barnett and Duvall's (hereafter B&D) (2005a) typology of power. Although B&D do not explicitly address every concept of power that has been proposed – and the number of concepts has proliferated significantly since their work[1]– it has the advantage of being comprehensive and, more important, logically exhaustive.

[1] Examples of "new" power concepts include protean power, network power, weaponized interdependence.

The B&D typology is organized along two analytical dimensions: a) interaction versus constitution, and b) direct versus diffuse.[2] The first dimension addresses whether power works through the interaction of pre-constituted actors or through social relations that constitute the actors. The second dimension differentiates whether power works directly through immediate connections between actors, or indirectly through distant and diffuse relations. Their combination leads to four broad categories of power – compulsory, institutional, structural, and productive – that we use below to conceptualize different strategies of the weak. While we have been attentive to looking for the presence of other power concepts, we have found B&D to provide a useful framework to work off in developing our typology. For example, while we initially considered "network power" as a separate category, it ultimately proved more fruitful to see it as operating within the B&D categories.

The B&D typology operates at a very abstract level and can be usefully refined for empirical analysis through closer consideration of what actors actually "do" when they exercise different forms of power. We therefore broaden it out in terms of subcategories corresponding to alternative actor strategies for using a type of power. For example, actors often aggregate compulsory power by forming coalitions (such as alliances) or bring compulsory power advantage on one issue to bear on another issue through linkage (as in coercive bargaining). Similarly, institutional power can operate through agenda-setting possibilities established by institutional rules, but also work by an actor engaging the institution itself to exert power. Such action strategies are immanent in the B&D typology, which refers to some of them as examples. We make them explicit, particularly with respect to how the weak can use them to augment their power. Importantly, we do not claim to identify all possible strategies but primarily ones that stand out in the literature and in the cases of this project.

Another major difference is that we address the interaction of power concepts. B&D deliberately (and appropriately) separate power categories by "sharpening the analytical differences" (2005a: 8 n.8) to make them mutually exclusive. However, our examination of actor strategies at a more granular empirical level leads us to also highlight the interactions and complementarities across these categories, and the ways in which a strategy or tactic can mobilize different aspects of power. For example, we do not locate network-based strategies solely within a single overarching power category but instead locate them across different categories, as we discuss below. Similarly, "soft power," which is not mentioned in the B&D typology, fits well with the productive power category – even if its "liberal" theoretical language is strikingly different from the critical theoretical tradition from which B&D primarily draw their productive power – but also engages elements of the other power categories. And where B&D define institutional power as being diffuse and based on

[2] B&D recognize that there are intermediate possibilities but treat these two dimensions as dichotomous for analytic clarity so that each power concept fits clearly into one cell in their 2x2 typology If these cells are at end points of continua, then the corners of their table correspond to their pure categories of power with blends and gradations in between. In this case, the operation of power in practice does not fit neatly in any single theoretical category but combine elements across categories. This allows for the important possibility of interaction among types of power, which we illustrate at many points.

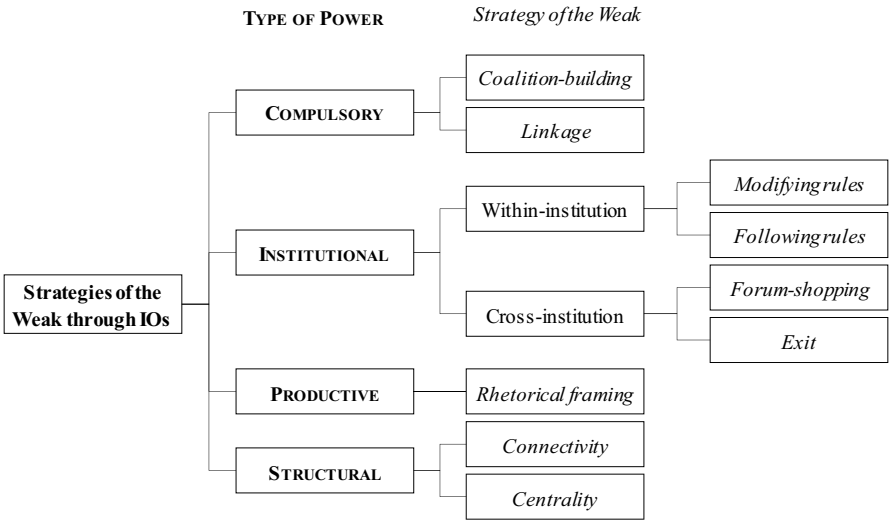

Figure 1 Typology of Strategies of the Weak in the context of International Organizations

interactions, we see it as sometimes being used more directly and even constitutively when linked with (say) compulsory power.

Our focus on strategies engages temporal considerations. These are present in B&D, but the sharpness of their analytic distinctions suppresses the ways in which interactions among pre-constituted actors may also entail social relations that re-constitute and change the actors and their relations over time. While B&D see structural power as direct and constitutive, we emphasize strategies for transforming structure diffusely over time through interactions, including by building diplomatic and intergovernmental networks and by working through IOs. Similarly, B&D point out that both evolving institutional rules and discursive practices can change power relationships over time. Careful attention to the timeframe of action, as we discuss below, is especially important for understanding how weak actors can overcome their circumstances to rectify their power deficits, often by combining power strategies across time.

Finally, B&D use "institutional power" as a label for a separate category of power. While we agree that power sometimes operates predominantly through institutions, our point is that institutions are often key factors in the development and operation of other types of power as well. This goes to our point about interactions among power categories and, especially, towards our argument that institutions such as IOs are important ways by which weak actors develop power strategies in general. However, we do not make any claims regarding the relative frequency with which various strategies are used by different actors.

We present our expanded typology in Figure 1. The bold categories correspond to B&D's typology of power, while the italicized subcategories indicate different strategies of the weak. In the remainder of this section, we discuss these different strategies of the weak in the order of the figure, highlighting examples both from the

special issue and, because not all strategies are covered in the present set of articles, from the wider literature.

2.1 Strategies of the weak involving compulsory power

Compulsory power "focuses on … relations between actors that allow one to shape directly the circumstances or actions of another… [as when] A's actions control B's actions or circumstances, even if unintentionally …. Compulsory power is not limited to material resources; it also entails symbolic and normative resources" (Barnett and Duvall 2005b: 49-50).

The exercise of compulsory power through the use of material resources underpins the classic conception of "strong" states and is a helpful place to start. States that are endowed with more resources can offer material inducements and issue threats of material deprivation in order to directly influence the circumstances and actions of other states. As Krasner observes with regard to economic resources, "In terms of positive incentives, [a hegemonic state] can offer access to its large domestic market and to its relatively cheap exports. In terms of negative ones, it can withhold foreign grants and engage in competition, potentially ruinous for the weaker state, in third country markets" (Krasner 1976 322–23). Accordingly, actors that are not endowed with such resources have less leverage over other actors and are considered materially weak. As discussed above, this is what scholars typically mean when referring to states as weak – and which we problematize by suggesting that sometimes they may only be seemingly weak.

Although IO rules temper the use of compulsory power based on material resources by limiting permissible actions, in practice, strong states continue to exercise compulsory power in the 'shadow of the law', using material inducements and threats on the fringes of IO interactions (Steinberg 2002), and even to shape the formal or informal rules of IOs themselves (Stone 2011). In the area of trade policy for instance, large states have threatened to restrict market access to pressure weak states not to register complaints at the WTO Dispute Settlement Body (Shaffer 2006). Some IOs are themselves strong actors, insofar as they can exercise compulsory power through their control over material resources. This is most pronounced in the case of the IMF, World Bank and other IOs which make the provision of financial resources conditional on specific actions on the part of recipient states (although, as we discuss below, they are not always able to induce compliance from weak recipient states).

Barnett and Duvall draw attention to the use of compulsory power strategies that rely on non-material resources, including control over expertise and information and the use of symbolic and normative resources. Many IOs, including the IMF, World Bank, and UNHCR are good examples, as they derive substantial power from control over expertise and information (Barnett and Finnemore 1999). The IMF, for instance, has unrivalled information about global economic trends as sharing information with the IO is a condition of membership, and it is able to leverage

its information advantages to directly impact outcomes, particularly when engaging with low-income countries (Lombardi and Woods 2008).

Can states with relatively few resources exert compulsory power? If so, under what conditions are they able to do this? Here we consider two main strategies – coalition-building and issue-linkage.

Coalition-building The formation of coalitions is perhaps the most common strategy that weaker parties use to exercise compulsory power. The formation of cartels by commodity exporting states is a good example of this strategy. The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) is the most prominent, a cartel through which thirteen states that are not strong in conventional metrics but collectively control 80% of global oil resources and nearly 40% of global production, act in concert to decisively influence world prices in their favor. In a bid to emulate OPEC, Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire have banded together, seeking to leverage their control over 65% of global cocoa supply to similarly influence prices in their favor (Mieu 2020).

In IO settings, many smaller states suffer from a scarcity of technical experts and are often unable to deploy a full contingent of personnel to participate in international negotiations impeding their ability to even participate, let alone exert influence (Jones, Deere-Birkbeck, and Woods 2010). To address this constraint, materially weak states have augmented and pooled their expertise and technical capacity. Small island states from the Pacific created a joint mission to represent them in Geneva-based IOs, while a group of middle-sized trading nations established a specific institution to augment their access to legal expertise for pursuing WTO disputes. In climate negotiations the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) joined forces with non-profit organizations to create a common pool of technical and legal advice (Betzold 2010). Similarly, in recent international tax negotiations, a strategy of building up expertise, developing professional networks, and acting in coalition enabled low-income states to secure incremental changes to international rules (Hearson et al., 2022).

Linkage-strategies Weak states may use a linkage strategy to leverage an advantage they hold in one narrow dimension of international relations to turn asymmetric interdependence (Keohane 1984; Long 2017) into a powerful bargaining chip. The small state of Djibouti, for instance, has actively used its strategic geopolitical location to secure substantial payments from powerful states including France, the US, Japan, and China, in return for the location of military bases on its territory (Styan 2016). In another example of a linkage strategy, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) – a weak state in many dimensions – has capitalized on its high endowments of rare-earth metals, including 60% of the world's coltan, to secure high tax commitments (royalty rates) from large multinational mining companies (Reuters 2018). Similarly, the Taiwanese government has deliberately cultivated dependence on the part of the US and other strong states on Taiwan for semi-conductors in order to increase its leverage in the security realm, a domain in which it has precious few

military resources, and is highly vulnerable to security threats from its near neighbor, China (Miller 2022; Sommer 2022).

As Davis (2004) and others have argued, institutionalization often aids with linkage by creating more credible links between issue domains.[3] Ferry and Zeitz (this issue) explore the use of linkage strategies in the IO context, examining the ways in which borrowing countries exert influence in negotiations with the IMF. Although borrowing countries turn to the IMF in moments of crisis and are in a weak negotiating position, they find that borrowing countries that hold a temporary UN Security Council seat are more likely to secure IMF bailouts more rapidly and on more favorable terms, suggesting that borrowers use linkage strategies to influence both the process of negotiations and their outcome.

In a more subtle use of compulsory power, weak actors can use linkage strategies that frame their own interests in terms of ideas that enjoy high public legitimacy and recognition among strong states, enabling weaker actors to exert influence through the deployment of high-value ideational resources.[4] Small island states drew on principles that were already widely accepted by strong states, especially the polluter pays and the precautionary principle, to successfully exert influence during climate negotiations (Betzold 2010). In the 1960s and 1970s, African, Caribbean, and Pacific countries successfully deployed arguments about sovereignty and the norm of non-interference to ward off the inclusion of a human rights suspension clause in the agreement governing their relations with European countries (Beall, 2024). Similarly, post-conflict states use sovereignty-based arguments to exert influence in their engagements with UN peacekeeping missions (Campbell and Matanock, this issue). In both cases weaker states are exercising compulsory power by linking their arguments to a norm that enjoys widespread recognition and legitimacy in the international community.

2.2 Strategies of the weak involving institutional power

Institutional power draws attention to the ways in which actors can leverage institutional rules and procedures to their advantage. This form of power entails "actors' control of others in indirect ways … [through] the formal and informal institutions that mediate between [actors by] … working through the rules and procedures that define those institutions … [to guide, steer, and constrain] the actions (or nonactions) and conditions of existence of others" (Barnett and Duvall 2005b: 51). Accordingly, actors that are weak in terms of compulsory power sometimes compensate this weakness by operating through institutional arrangements.

[3] Benvenisti and Downs (2010), however, argue that linkages-strategies are made more difficult due to the fragmented nature of institutions. Because institutions are created along narrow functionalist lines and with restricted scope, relatively weak states have less opportunity to build effectively the cross-issue coalitions they need.

[4] This use of compulsory power verges into productive power, as discussed below, and goes to our point regarding the interrelation among different types of power.

Crucially, the rules and procedures that underpin institutions are malleable, providing opportunities to not just benefit (or lose) from the prevailing rules but to work within and shape rules to one's advantage. The literature abounds with examples of strong actors deploying institutional power including by controlling the agenda, excluding weaker parties from informal meetings where key decisions are made, threatening to exit, and influencing the appointment and work of IO bureaucrats.

Weak states can also be adept at using institutional power, and we differentiate between four strategies. Within a given IO, weak states may leverage the equalising aspects of IO rules and procedures to constrain strong states (*rule-following*), or they may work to change existing rules and procedures where these advantage strong states (*rule-modifying*). Operating on the wider international stage, weak states may leverage their participation in multiple IOs to exert influence (*forum shopping*); or they may simply threaten to walk away (*exit*). We discuss each in turn.

Rule-following A key insight from the institutional literature is that institutions constrain the use of brute force; for this reason, engaging with stronger states in the context of a rules-based IO is often a better option for weak actors than operating outside of them, even if the rules are unfair. As Keohane notes, many IOs are institutions 'of the privileged, by the privileged, and all too often for the privileged' however, 'in the absence of such institutions, dictation by strong states would be even more direct, less encumbered by rules…' (Keohane 2001).

Precisely because they are better off when strong states engage with them through IOs rather than outside of them, weak states tend to be ardent supporters of a rules-based system (Milewicz and Goodin, 2018; Milewicz, 2020), even as they champion reforms. Weak states derive institutional power from existing rules and procedures, most notably voting rules and institutionalized monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, which help ensure that strong states abide by the rules.

Voting rules are a notable source of institutional power for weak states, particularly the one-country, one-seat, one-vote system of the UN, and the consensus based decision-making norm at the WTO, which confers as much formal voting power on St Lucia as the United States (Panke 2012). In other IOs, including the IMF and World Bank, the voting power of weak states is tempered as formal representation is aligned with economic size. Moreover, formal voting within IOs always occurs in the shadow of compulsory power, as arm-twisting and the possibility of retaliation deters weaker states from fully exercising their formal voting powers (Steinberg 2002; Jawara and Kwa 2003). For this reason, weak states often use institutional rule-following strategies in combination with coalition-building strategies grounded in compulsory power. By forming coalitions weak states can use the 'power of numbers' to get particular issues onto the agenda and stand united in the face of coercive pressure tactics (Odell 2010). In the IMF for example, weak states have deployed deft coalition-building strategies to aggregate votes in ways that advance their interests (Lombardi and Woods 2008).

Julia Morse and Bridget Coggins (this issue) explore a more subtle rule-following tactic where states leverage gaps in institutional rules to be strategically

absent from controversial votes. A weak state may fear the political consequences of staking out a clear position on a controversial vote. Being strategically absent can be an optimal way for a country to avoid capitulating to one side and to shirk political blowback. Unlike an 'abstain' vote, where a country publicly states its neutrality and may leave both sides dissatisfied, skipping out leverages institutional rules to minimize political consequences. Absence is quiet, a form of political expression that may go unnoticed. Morse and Coggins note that in recent UNGA votes on Ukraine, news coverage has highlighted voting patterns and abstentions but paid no attention to countries that skipped out on voting.

Legalization is another major attribute of IOs that has the potential to provide weak states with substantial institutional power, encompassed in the specific dispute settlement and enforcement mechanisms. Through these institutional features a weak state can, in theory at least, ensure that strong states adhere to the rules. A series of studies have explored dispute settlement processes in the WTO, which has one of the highest levels of legalization of any IO. Although the largest and most powerful states are the most frequent users of the system, larger developing countries, have successfully waged disputes against large states, notably Brazil which won two landmark cases against the US and EU (Hopewell 2015). Even some smaller developing countries, including the Philippines, have acquired sufficient legal expertise to pursue and, in some cases, win disputes (Davis and Bermeo 2009).

Modifying the rules Weak states also look to modify institutional rules and procedures in order to augment their institutional power within IOs.

The microstate of St Lucia, for instance, successfully challenged a rule at the WTO which stipulated that only government officials could attend WTO hearings. By winning the right to determine the composition of its own delegation, St Lucia ensured that it, and other materially weak states, would be able to draw on non-governmental sources of expertise in future (Orozco 2021). African, Caribbean, and Pacific states inserted seemingly innocuous procedural checks into the Cotonou Agreement that acted as a constraint on the EU's ability to unilaterally suspend benefits (Beall, 2024).

Pursuing this theme, Campbell and Matanock (this issue) examine the ways in which post-conflict states take advantage of the spaces left within incomplete peacebuilding contracts they negotiate with IOs. Using a repertoire of procedural moves – based on the IO's mandate, where within the country it operates, whom it hires, and when it starts and ends – they quietly and effectively influence IO interventions. Similarly, Andrew Lugg (this issue) shows that coalitions of weak or formerly weak states can band together to push through the creation of LIGOs that help advance their interests. For example, Global South countries have used their numerical advantage at the UN to push for the creation of LIGOs such as the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), and the Peacebuilding Commission.

Such examples reveal how weak states can exercise power in quiet and subtle ways and, echoing Scott (2000), highlight the power-shifting potential of banal everyday acts by seemingly less powerful actors. As Hearson et al. (2022) argue in their study of global tax institutions, incremental changes won by low-income countries

are significant because they constitute layered changes that promote the potential for systemic re-alignment.

Forum-shopping Weak states can leverage institutional power by taking advantage of regime complexity and overlapping institutions, which enable them to forum-shop and select the institution that best allows them to advance their interests. While this strategy is often deployed by strong states (Raustiala and Victor 2004), it has also been used by weak states. In the trade context, preferential agreements have proliferated and sit alongside the WTO, providing states with a choice of forums to pursue their interests, including for litigation. For instance, in deciding to pursue a case against the imposition by the US of tariffs on corn brooms, Mexico opted to proceed under NAFTA rather than the WTO, and did so in order to avoid creating an unfavorable precedent at the WTO (Busch 2007).

Andrew Lugg (this issue) shows how the threat by developing countries to create a new development organization within the UN system, the so-called Special United Nations Fund for Economic Development or SUNFED, spurred the creation of the International Development Association (IDA) at the World Bank, which dramatically altered the nature of development finance.

Exit While threats to walk-away from an IO are often associated with strong states, credible alternatives and the ability to threaten exit can be leveraged by weak states too.

In development finance, the rise of new lending institutions, including those backed by China and private investors, has provided many African governments with a new source of leverage in their negotiations with traditional lenders such as the World Bank. The spectre of a credible alternative source of finance has enabled them to secure more funding for priority projects, discretion over contentious policies, and flexibility of financing (Zeitz 2019).

The "strategic absence" discussed by Morse and Coggins (this issue) is a type of temporary exit from an institution. Morse and Coggins show how weaker countries absent themselves from contentious UN General Assembly votes when they face pressure from rival great powers. Such scenarios are often "no win" outcomes for weaker states as they have little to gain but much to lose from explicitly siding with, for example, the United States over Russia or China, or vice-versa, given that they could be subject to punishment from the great power they cross. Instead, the article shows that states simply absent themselves from key votes, using exit to resist pressure.

2.3 Strategies of the weak involving productive power

The concept of productive power draws our attention to the ways in which deep-seated norms and worldviews help constitute our social world, structure our engagements with each other, and confer power and privilege upon some actors relative to others. Productive power "works through diffuse constitutive relations to produce

the situated social capacities of actors…. [It] concerns discourse, the social processes and systems of knowledge through which meaning is produced, fixed, lived, experienced, and transformed" to produce and give meaning to social identities and capacities (Barnett and Duvall 2005b: 48, 55). Accordingly, even actors that are considered weak in terms of compulsory or other types of power can compensate for it through the production of social, discursive, or knowledge-based capacity.

In the context of IOs, deep-seated worldviews that underpin IO norms, rules and procedures can advantage some states and disadvantage others. In WTO circles (and wider knowledge-generating institutions, including universities), for instance, economic theories of comparative advantage and free trade have been widely accepted as cognitive frames and so embedded in the worldview of government officials from strong states that to question or challenge them has been seen as heretical (many would argue that it still is). Such dominant and entrenched worldviews have long disadvantaged developing countries pursuing industrialization through infant-industry protection (Chang 2002). As this example points out, there is often an alignment between the dominant cognitive frames, the institutions that develop and promulgate them, and the interests of powerful actors.

Weak states have often found themselves disadvantaged by the worldviews that underpin IOs and have worked to change them. The League of Nations, for instance, was founded on the idea of equality among nations, but the European governments that created the institution did not extend this norm to non-European nations, thereby creating an international system that racialized the norm of sovereign (in) equality. Anticolonial movements articulated alternative worldviews and successfully campaigned for a shift in the norms that underpinned the international system, securing widespread recognition of the right to self-determination and principle of nondomination, which were integrated into the foundations of the UN, thereby dramatically augmenting the institutional power of non-European states in the international system (Getachew 2019). Similarly, when weak states use strategic absence to resist pressure from other states (as Morse and Coggin show in their article), they also implicitly exercise a form of productive power insofar as their nonparticipation undermines the legitimacy of the voting outcome.

Rhetorical framing To alter norms, principles, and beliefs that disadvantage them, weak states deploy rhetorical (re)framing strategies. Persuading actors to adjust or even replace deep-seated worldviews requires the generation, promulgation and widespread societal acceptance of alternative theories and worldviews. Generating change in the norms underpinning an IO can take a long time and typically involves mobilising transnational alliances, including knowledge-generating institutions and media organizations.

The rhetorical (re)framing of the GATT/WTO rules on medicine patents is a case in point. In the 1980s, powerful transnational firms and their governments framed stringent patent protections as necessary for innovation, and protection against theft and piracy. During the HIV/AIDS epidemic, a group of weak states, led by India and South Africa, mobilized a transnational alliance of public health experts, NGOs, and media organizations and successfully reframed stringent patents as impeding access to essential medicines, securing modest shifts in WTO rules in the face of fierce

opposition from powerful pharmaceutical companies (Odell and Sell 2006). Another example is how the IBSA Dialogue Forum – composed of India, Brazil, and South Africa – reframed cyber governance in terms of human development, thereby challenging US dominance of the issue to achieve significant reforms (Hofmann and Pawlak 2023).

2.4 Strategies of the weak involving structural power

Structural power focuses on the ways in which actors are socially positioned in relation to each other, and the ways in which relational hierarchies confer advantages on some actors relative to others. It "operates as the constitutive relations of a direct and specific—hence, mutually constituting—kind…. [It] concerns the structures—or, more precisely, the co-constitutive, internal relations of structural positions—that define" social beings and their relations (Barnett and Duvall 2005b: 48, 52). As we discuss below, actors that are weak in terms of compulsory power, need not be weak in terms of their specific constitutive position in a given system.

Viewing the international system through this lens draws attention to the wider structural context in which states are embedded. IPE scholars have long documented the ways in which states are advantaged and disadvantaged by their structural position in the global economy, including the work of dependency and world systems theorists in the 1960s and 1970s. Recent IPE scholarship has picked up on this structural power differential in the global economy, conceiving the global economy as a hierarchical set of interdependent networks in which states derive differing amounts of power due to their structural position within these networks. An emerging body of scholarship – 'new structuralism' – draws attention to the ways in which key global economic networks have converged towards hub and spoke systems, revealing the substantial power that states can derive from positioning themselves as hubs (Farrell and Newman 2019; Slaughter 2004; 2017).

The global financial system, for instance, is understood as a complex network of creditor-debtor relationships that connect different types of actors – from central banks to hedge funds - across national borders. When these relationships are mapped, they reveal a hierarchical network with clear core-periphery dynamics: some states, including the US and UK, are central nodes in the international financial system, home to a high proportion of financial assets and, crucially, linked to a high number of other states (Oatley et al. 2013).

In many of these networks, the most central nodes are not randomly distributed across the world but are typically territorially concentrated in the advanced industrial economies, and the United States in particular. States that enjoy positions as central nodes can weaponize interdependence on the level of the network itself, including by limiting access to the entire global network. Because hubs offer extraordinary efficiency benefits, and because it is extremely difficult to circumvent them, states that can control hubs have considerable coercive power, and states or other actors that are denied access to hubs can suffer substantial consequences (Farrell and Newman 2019, 2023).

A structural power lens helps us to understand that states may be weak not simply because they lack material capabilities, but because they are relegated to the periphery of the international system, with few connections and high levels of asymmetrical interdependence. In the financial system, for instance, peripheral states are inherently vulnerable to financial crises and changes in financial policies (including interest rates) in core states while, conversely, core states are immune to crises and policy changes in the periphery (Oatley et al. 2013).

Against the backdrop of interdependent networks, weak states can deploy two inter-related strategies to enhance their structural power position and gain international leverage.

Connectivity strategies Weak states can diversify their connections within international networks, increasing the number of actors they are connected to, thereby reducing levels of asymmetric interdependence. This is largely a defensive move: by increasing their connectivity weak states can reduce their dependence on specific actors and hence their vulnerability to coercive pressure.

While small states are typically disadvantaged, network connectedness can operate in unexpected ways even in the world of finance. Ferry and Zeitz (this issue) examine negotiations between weak borrowing states and the IMF for bailouts in times of crisis. They find that when major IMF shareholders – particularly the US – are more connected and hence financially exposed to the crisis country, the negotiations are more likely to be completed rapidly and the terms of the loan more favorable to borrowers. This is a good example of how weakness in terms of material power – in this case, economic fragility – can be flipped into a source of power if it creates a threat to other states.

The structural position of a given state in the global system is, by definition, fixed at a point in time (indeed structures are powerful precisely because they limit agency and cannot readily be altered). However, structural positions can change very substantially over time, as the recent rise of large developing countries, including China, India, and Brazil, illustrates. Crucially, the choices made by weak states can, over time, impact their structural position in the international system, and hence their structural power.

Centrality strategies Weak states can manoeuvre to increase their centrality in a network and, by situating themselves as key nodes, gain structural power. Taiwan's strategy of positioning itself as a central node or 'choke point' in the global supply chain of advanced semi-conductors can be understood as a centrality strategy (Farrell and Newman 2023; Miller, 2022). This is a more offensive move: by increasing their centrality, small states derive informational advantages as well as their brokerage and gatekeeping capabilities, increasing their opportunity for leverage and influence (Manulak and Mesquita, both this issue).

Weak states often pursue both network strategies in tandem, increasing their connectivity and centrality. In the global economy, a series of small states have successfully pursued network strategies to position themselves as vital hubs for

globally critical flows of capital, goods, and ideas. These states have few natural resource endowments, their small size provides them with little in the way of a domestic market, and they generally lack the major bargaining chips used in international economic negotiations. Many are in remote locations which frustrates diversification strategies, leaving them highly dependent on a few trading partners and vulnerable to both external shocks and coercive pressure. Yet, they have acquired a significant level of international influence by using strategies of connectivity and centrality to position themselves as key nodes in different economic networks, acting as brokers and offering intermediary services to wealthy nations and high net worth individuals.

The Nordic countries, for instance, worked on their network centrality and connectivity – as discussed in this special issue by Michael Manulak – by placing many officials throughout the United Nation Secretariat. This "put the Nordic countries in a far more influential international position than their economic or military strength would suggest" (Novosad and Werker 2019: 29). Others have cultivated themselves as offshore financial centres (Andorra, Liechtenstein, Mauritius), or act as hubs for global logistical operations such as air freight (Qatar, United Arab Emirates), transhipping (Panama), and logistics (Hong Kong) (Martinus et al. 2021). Through network strategies, these small states reduced their vulnerability and dependence, augmented their structural position within the global economy, and derived substantial wealth in the process.

Weak states have also used diplomatic network strategies to exert influence in their foreign policy relations. Michael Manulak (this issue) explores the ways in which weak states use diplomacy to enhance their network position in international relations. Compared with acquiring material capabilities, weak states can more readily afford a significant investment in diplomacy than in military assets and may be more nimble diplomatic players, featuring less bureaucratic paralysis than larger, more institutionalized actors. As he shows, Canada was able to leverage its connectedness and centrality in diplomatic networks during the Korean War and Suez Crisis to significantly influence outcomes despite its relatively weak military capabilities. Rafael Mesquita (this issue) builds on the theme of diplomacy and reveals how Cuba – as a small revisionist state – has invested heavily in diplomacy, including at the UN, and cultivated a central position in diplomatic networks. Cuba is both integrated into dominant networks and has acquired substantial brokerage capability by cultivating exclusive ties with more isolationist states, providing it with leverage and outside options to withstand opposition from strong states.

3 Overview of the special issue

Within this framework, the articles in the special issue explore a range of strategies weak or seemingly weak states use to advance their interests or resist pressure from stronger states. Using a variety of methods, the papers provide empirical analysis that sheds light on what weak actors actually "do" when they exercise different forms of power as well as new theoretical insights that helped us to refine the

framework that we set out above. We have ordered the papers in broad alignment with Figure 1, according to the type of power and strategies that they highlight.

Lauren Ferry and Alexandra Zeitz (2024) use new data on the duration of IMF-borrower negotiations to demonstrate the logic of institutionalized issue-linkage (*compulsory power*) in the context of the IMF. Countries that need help from the IMF are, nearly by definition, materially weak. However, Ferry and Zeitz show how borrowers who enjoy shared membership in another IO (the UN Security Council) with creditor countries fare better, suggesting that borrowers use linkage strategies to influence both the process of negotiations and their outcome. The paper also shows that borrowing countries with relatively high levels of economic connectivity (*structural power*) to creditor countries, and which therefore posed a threat of adverse spillovers, similarly fared better in negotiations with the IMF.

Four papers provide insights into *institutional power* strategies. Katherine Beall (2024) explores the tension of whether IOs serve the interests of weak or strong states. She asks why African, Caribbean, and Pacific states accepted a human rights measure that allows for intervention in domestic affairs to be added to the Lomé Convention, an arrangement that structured their relations with the EU. Beall argues that while they opposed the inclusion of this measure, faced with the EU's threat to unilaterally impose the measure outside of the Lomé arrangement, developing countries used a strategy of modifying rules to partially constrain the EU's action, permitting human rights measures but influencing the terms around how they can be carried out.

Susanna Campbell and Aila Matanock (2024) examine the power of post-conflict states (again, presumed to be weak across many dimensions) vis-à-vis the IOs that are typically tasked by powerful countries with overseeing state building efforts. Focusing on the agency of "host" countries, they demonstrate how post-conflict states can exploit ambiguities and blanks in the institutional arrangements that govern IOs' presence in post-conflict states – described as incomplete contracts – to assert their interests. Using a mixed-method research design, the article shows how strategies of modifying rules can serve the interests of the weaker actor.

Turning to the United Nations General Assembly, Julia Morse and Bridget Coggins (2024) examine puzzling patterns of 'strategic absence' in voting. They show that when countries miss votes at the UN, it is often because they wish to avoid taking a side in contentious debates between powerful rivals such as the US and China and/or Russia. The authors suggest strategic absence is not the same as abstention: while abstain votes cut into the legitimacy of a proposed resolution, absences are ambiguous silences. Weak states can deploy strategic absence when they see no advantages to publicly taking a stand on a resolution and instead want simply to avoid political pressure and possible coercion.

Andrew Lugg (2024) tackles the question of how IOs adapt to changing membership, as well as shifting constellations of power and preferences amongst their members, over time. He introduces the idea of "linked intergovernmental organizations" (LIGOs), arguing that governments revise and update the agreements embodied in different IOs not through reforming them—which is costly—but by creating new linked institutions. This strategy allows states to modify the rules of IGOs in their favor. Importantly, a strategy of creating LIGOs gives weak states access to

important institutional levers of influence, such as control over programmatic decisions and bureaucratic appointments, that potentially enhance their power over time.

Two papers explore *structural power* strategies. Michael Manulak (2024) considers how materially weak(er) countries can create and then use diplomatic networks to gain influence. Drawing on social network analysis, he proposes the idea of replaceability as a measure of how central a country is within a network of diplomatic relations. Through case studies of the Suez crisis and the Korean war, he shows how Canada was able to use its structural position in diplomatic networks to influence outcomes beyond what its material power alone would have allowed.

Rafael Mesquita (2024) also looks at diplomatic structures, focusing on the case of Cuba, a materially weak state that has engaged a strategy of diplomatic brokerage to resist pressure to reform from the United States. Using network theory to measure the ability of all UN General Assembly member states to serve as brokers – by making links that would otherwise not exist – the article shows that Cuba is particularly central by this measure. Mesquita complements this analysis with a qualitative investigation of how Cuba's diplomats have leveraged that position to resist pressures for change, such as by reviving the Non-Aligned Movement in the post-Cold War period.

4 Conclusion

The special issue's overall finding is that while weak states are often profoundly disadvantaged in the global system, they have more power than is commonly assumed, and a wide variety of strategies for exercising that power. Once multiple dimensions of power are accounted for, states that seem weak on one dimension, such as compulsory power through material capabilities, can still pursue strategies that allow them to leverage other dimensions of power. Even states that lack power across multiple dimensions still have ways to advance their interests or to resist pressure from others. While not discounting the manifold constraints they face, weak states are not doomed "to suffer what they must," but rather have significant agency to shape outcomes through various strategies. This finding adds further grist to the call for international relations scholars to pay greater attention to the power and strategies of weak states.

The special issue serves as a reminder that, as international relations scholars, we need to take a deliberate and reflective approach to power in theory-building and research design. All too often scholarship assumes that power automatically means material economic or military power, which leads scholars to omit key mechanisms through which influence is built and wielded. Econometric work in particular often measures power in very reductionist terms (for example, by using GDP to "control for" power). But if power is built and wielded in multiple ways and is highly conditional on the strategies that actors deploy, more subtle theories and empirical measures are needed. Controlling for the distribution of material power is important, but it is too far a leap to then interpret this as a valid and comprehensive measurement of who is powerful and who is not.

Second, and related, the articles in this special issue serve as a reminder that the power that states have can shift over time. Weaker states deploy a variety of innovative and creative strategies to augment their power capabilities over time. A static snapshot of the distribution of power is therefore more of a starting point for analysis, not the final word on what outcomes theorists should expect. Power needs to be theorized not just in terms of who has or does not have it, but what they do with it or not, and the ways in which power dynamics shift over time.

Third, the special issue shows that, despite a relative lack of certain types of power, nearly all kinds of states possess significant agency to shape outcomes. The intellectual rationale for prioritising the analysis of great powers because they "matter" more should therefore be seen as a question to be studied empirically, not an assumption that ex ante curtails the scope of inquiry. Indeed, investigating the 'power of the weak' is a critical part of understanding the nature of power and how those states that have a lot of some types of power can—and cannot—wield these in the international system.

This special issue has limited its focus to the context of international organizations – as both forums and actors. Given the widespread institutionalization of world politics, we expect the arguments to apply to a wide swathe of international relations. Because institutions can help actualize the strategies explored above, non-institutionalized contexts may be more challenging for weaker states. None of the strategies of the weak described in this special issue *require* the existence of institutions except, obviously, the ones drawing on institutional power. We therefore expect that weaker actors can deploy strategies at least to some extent even in weakly or non-institutionalized contexts, which we see as a promising domain for further research.

Data availability We do not analyze or generate any datasets, because our work proceeds within a theoretical and qualitative approach.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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