

# A Competition of Ideas: An Analysis of the Role of International Organizations from the Perspectives of Neoliberalism and Neoconservatism

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## Abstract

**In the process of globalization, global interdependence continues to deepen, and global issues become increasingly complex. Ideological competition has gradually surpassed traditional power struggles to become a core variable shaping the evolution of the international order. As the two dominant ideologies in contemporary international governance, the differences in their ideologies not only influence the foreign policy choices of various countries but also have profound and differentiated impacts on the role positioning, functional boundaries, and practical effectiveness of international organizations. This article, taking the core differences between these two ideologies as a starting point, systematically analyzes the core propositions of neoliberalism and neoconservatism in three dimensions: the value logic of international cooperation, the cognitive boundaries of state sovereignty, and the relationship between the market and the state. It then explores their differentiated approaches to shaping the role of international organizations: Based on the demands of multilateral governance, neoliberalism assigns international organizations the complex role of "rule-maker," "multilateral coordinator," and "rule-monitor," promoting them as stabilizers of the global order. Neoconservatism, driven by the supremacy of national interests, positions international organizations as "instruments of great power interests," weakening their multilateral nature and autonomous authority. Research has found that this ideological competition not only triggers inherent tensions in the role definition of international organizations but also entangles them in three interrelated dilemmas: legitimacy, efficiency, and autonomy. The key to overcoming these dilemmas lies in building a multi-ideological dialogue mechanism to build consensus, strengthening inclusive rule design to balance demands, and enhancing organizational autonomy to free themselves from power manipulation. The theoretical value of this article lies in expanding the analytical dimension of international organization role research from the perspective of ideological interaction, addressing the limitation of existing research on implicit ideological variables. Its practical significance lies in providing an operational framework for international organizations to address ideological differences and optimize governance effectiveness in areas such as global economic governance and public health collaboration amidst the countercurrents of globalization.**

## Keywords

**Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, International Organizations, Ideological Competition, Role Definition.**

## 1. Introduction

As globalization continues to deepen, cross-domain issues such as the need for coordinated climate governance, deepening linkages between economies, and the cross-border spread of public health and safety are becoming increasingly prominent. As core vehicles of global

governance, the role of international organizations is not fixed but is constantly reshaped by ideological competition, the struggle for great power interests, and the evolving nature of global issues.

Ideological competition is a hidden yet crucial variable: it not only influences the design of organizational functions but also shapes the logic of actual action. When a particular ideology dominates, the organization's regulatory framework and work priorities adjust accordingly.

After the 1970s, the acceleration of globalization and the expansion of the market economy made neoliberalism the mainstream of global governance. Its advocacy of "free market flow" and "multilateral cooperation first" has given international organizations the core tasks of rule-making and multilateral coordination, driving their transformation into "servants of globalization." Neoconservatism, centered on the "supremacy of national interests" and the "logic of power," questions the multilateral framework, arguing that international organizations should serve the strategies of major powers. It has even pressured the modification of rules and weakened multilateral mechanisms, exposing organizations to pressure to become "instrumentalized." Current academic research often focuses on explicit dimensions such as institutional design and power structure. While some studies have touched upon the influence of ideology, most remain within the analysis of a single concept. Few systematically analyze the core differences between the two ideologies and their differential shaping of organizational role positioning and functional boundaries, nor do they clearly address the organizational dilemmas caused by ideological competition. Against this background, this article takes the differences between the two concepts as the core thread, combines the dynamic properties of concept competition, analyzes its profound impact on organizational role positioning and functional adjustment, sorts out the generation mechanism of role dilemmas and proposes optimization paths, and strives to provide theoretical support for understanding the survival logic of organizations in concept games and improving the effectiveness of global governance.

## **2. The Core Connotations and Conceptual Differences Between Neoliberalism and Neoconservatism**

Although both belong to the conservative camp, neoliberalism and neoconservatism are like two separate schools of thought, their core beliefs and perspectives on the international order diverging significantly. This difference lies at the root of their ideological rivalry.

Neoliberalism prioritizes "market order" and "consultative action." When discussing the international economy, it insists that countries shouldn't use borders to restrict their economies too tightly, but rather allow for freer trade and global capital flows. It also argues that the market itself can allocate global resources more efficiently, and that states should refrain from meddling. Regarding international cooperation, it strongly favors multilateralism, believing that the international community must have unified rules, otherwise policy will be a chaotic mess. International organizations serve as platforms for setting rules and mediating conflicts. Furthermore, it advocates that "sovereignty shouldn't be too tightly held," implying that countries need to cede some power in order to participate in multilateral cooperation.

Neoconservatives have a completely different mindset, preoccupied with the idea that "national interests come first" and "power alone carries weight." In its eyes, the international order lacks a unified authority; to put it bluntly, it's "rulerless." Ultimately, nations must rely on strength to protect their own interests; as for multilateral cooperation, it must align with the core interests of major powers to be worthwhile[1].

When it comes to the economy, it doesn't believe the market can "take care of everything." Instead, it believes that nations must take control of their economies, safeguarding their economic security through industrial policies and protecting their own trade. It also holds little

respect for international organizations, viewing them as mere tools for major powers to profit. If the rules conflict with national interests, it will either withdraw or create its own, even at the expense of undermining the institutions' credibility. Furthermore, it places extreme importance on "not giving up even a single ounce of sovereignty" and absolutely refuses to allow external rules to interfere with national decision-making.

The core differences between the two lie in three key areas: First, their attitudes toward international cooperation. Neoliberals believe that multilateral frameworks should benefit everyone, while neoconservatives prioritize their own national interests, disregarding others. Second, their understanding of national sovereignty. Neoliberals are willing to cede some sovereignty in exchange for international cooperation, while neoconservatives fiercely protect "absolute sovereignty" and insist on having the final say. Third, their understanding of the relationship between the market and the government. One advocates "the market should take charge," while the other insists that "the state should take the lead." Precisely because of these fundamental differences, their expectations of what international organizations should do are also diametrically opposed, which has become the core of their ideological conflict.

### **3. The Differential Impact of Ideological Competition on the Role Definition of International Organizations**

What role should international organizations play? Ultimately, it's the product of the tug-of-war between ideas and power, each shaping the other. Just looking at the clash between neoliberalism and neoconservatism, we can see that whenever these two philosophies clash, the role of international organizations becomes dualistic, even self-contradictory.

In the neoliberal framework, international organizations are primarily "multilateral coordinators." They prioritize rules—international organizations must establish a system of rules, integrating global governance into a common framework, minimizing policy differences between countries and improving collaboration. At the same time, they emphasize mutual benefit and win-win outcomes. Whenever diverging interests arise between countries, international organizations must mediate to avoid a zero-sum game. Another crucial aspect cannot be overlooked: neoliberalism has always discouraged excessive government intervention. Therefore, international organizations must also act as "supervisors," closely monitoring member states' adherence to multilateral rules and preventing trade protectionism, capital controls, and other practices that undermine market openness and freedom.

From this perspective, international organizations must both establish rules, mediate conflicts, and monitor violations—they have become, almost, global "rule guardians."

On the neoconservative side, however, the role of international organizations has shifted significantly toward becoming "tools of great powers." Neoconservatism prioritizes "national interests first," and therefore the value of international organizations depends entirely on their ability to serve great powers—rules that suit their will are used, and those that do not are set aside[2]. Great powers also use pressure and resource manipulation to compel international organizations to modify their rules, firmly seizing the power to set them. Furthermore, neoconservatism believes that multilateral coordination is inefficient and can harm national interests. Consequently, the role of international organizations in "coordinating interests" has been weakened, becoming platforms for great powers to convey their demands and suppress small and medium-sized countries. Furthermore, neoconservatism emphasizes "no surrender of sovereignty," so when international organizations "supervise the rules," they are only effective for small and medium-sized countries. They are completely powerless to enforce violations by great powers, even leading to a "double standard."

When these two ideologies clash, the role of international organizations becomes uncertain and constantly shifts: when neoliberalism prevails, they become "multilateral coordinators"; when

neoconservatism gains momentum, they become "tools of major powers." This back-and-forth directly undermines their stability and credibility, and becomes the core reason for the debate over their role.

#### **4. Functional Adaptation of International Organizations Amidst Ideological Competition**

Since countries often disagree on ideas, international organizations, to increase their viability, often proactively adjust their responsibilities. This adjustment is most evident in three key areas: policymaking, resource allocation, and dispute resolution.

First, regarding policymaking, international organizations are no longer rigidly bound by a set of rules, but are acting more flexibly. Neoliberalism is obsessed with opening markets, while neoconservatism is focused on national interests. To balance these two needs, international organizations intentionally leave some flexibility in their basic rules, allowing member states to adjust their implementation based on their own circumstances. For example, global trade rules promote widespread tariff reductions while also incorporating "security exceptions"—if a country perceives its economic security as threatened, it can intervene according to the rules. This approach addresses both market opening and national interests, meeting the needs of both sides.

Second, regarding resource allocation, international organizations have adopted the "compensation" approach. Neoliberalism advocates for resource allocation based on efficiency, while neoconservatism prefers to ensure that resources flow to its own countries or allies. To reconcile these two perspectives, international organizations, on the one hand, coordinate and allocate resources according to multilateral principles, and on the other hand, establish special funds and provide technical assistance to compensate countries that may suffer losses due to existing rules, while also leaving room for cooperation among major powers. For example, global development aid focuses on helping developing countries meet their development needs while also encouraging major powers to participate through cooperation, thereby reducing the obstacles that ideological differences hinder the flow of resources[3].

As for dispute resolution, international organizations prioritize sitting down and discussing matters, rather than adopting a rigid approach to enforcement. Neoliberalism believes that arbitration must preserve the authority of the rules, while neoconservatism is often opposed to rulings that are unfavorable to them. To ease this tension, international organizations will first encourage conflicting parties to sit down and discuss and reach consensus. Even when arbitration is required, they will rely on non-coercive methods such as technical support and coordination of interests to ensure implementation, minimizing the risk of resentment from major powers.

While these adjustments have alleviated ideological conflicts, they have made the work of international organizations increasingly uncertain: Should principles be prioritized, or should they favor those with greater power? How much initiative should they retain? This ambiguity in direction will not only lead to more intense debates about its role positioning in the future, but also sow the seeds of deeper troubles about "who it really is."

#### **5. Role Dilemma of International Organizations Caused by Ideological Competition**

While ideological clashes have forced international organizations to adjust some of their functions, not only have the fundamental differences remained unresolved, but they have also dragged these organizations into challenges with legitimacy, efficiency, and autonomy, ultimately compromising their overall governance effectiveness.

Let's start with the legitimacy issue—essentially, whether international organizations can command the support of a majority of countries remains uncertain. For international organizations to maintain their footing, they must secure the approval of their member states for their actions. However, once ideological conflict arises, countries' expectations of international organizations become completely distorted: neoliberals hope for increased multilateral coordination, while neoconservatives are willing to accept organizations only if they align with their own preferences. With such divergent positions, consensus on rule-making and decision-making is difficult to achieve. Some countries simply withdraw from the mechanisms, while others superficially agree but secretly fail to implement them, gradually eroding the organizations' authority. To put it bluntly, this ideological divide is gradually eroding countries' collective sense of identity[4].

Next, let's address the issue of efficiency. The key issue is the persistently slow decision-making process, which is particularly inefficient. International organizations need to achieve rapid progress by reaching consensus among their member states, but with endless clashing over concepts, there's simply no consensus on policy direction. When it comes to setting policies, debates escalate, with debates over whether to open the door to the market or to keep the state in control. When it comes to practical matters like allocating resources and resolving conflicts, the debates are endless, and no truly effective solutions can be found. If this continues, not only will global challenges go unaddressed, but the best opportunities for resolution will be missed, and the organization's ability to accomplish less and less will naturally decline.

Finally, there's the dilemma of autonomy, which ultimately stems from being manipulated by the power of major powers. Ideological competition is inherently intertwined with great power competition, with major powers constantly imposing their own ideals on international organizations, attempting to manipulate their roles—Neoliberal powers will push organizations to strengthen their multilateral functions to maintain the market order they dominate; neoconservative powers will pressure organizations to act on their behalf. As a result, international organizations are unable to make independent decisions, and their roles and functions have become subordinate to the ideologies of major powers, forgetting their original purpose of serving the global public interest.

What's even more troublesome is that these three dilemmas are intertwined: if countries no longer recognize the organization, their willingness to cooperate will be weakened, and decision-making will only be slower; if the organization loses its autonomy, it will be difficult to meet the needs of different countries, and countries will be even less likely to recognize it, and it will eventually get deeper and deeper into a vicious cycle.

## **6. Optimizing the Role of International Organizations in the Context of Ideological Competition**

To break the role dilemma of international organizations, the core must be to "resolve differences and strengthen autonomy" and build a collaborative path from the three directions of ideological dialogue, rule design, and capacity building, so that organizations can be transformed from "ideological game fields" to "interest coordination platforms."

Building a mechanism for dialogue on diverse ideas can resolve the legitimacy dilemma. Establish a dual-track platform of "regular dialogue + special seminars": Regularly hold ideological coordination meetings, inviting member state representatives and experts to discuss the applicability of concepts on topics such as climate governance and economic cooperation, focusing on consensus on "maintaining global public interests" and "protecting the right to development." Special seminars will be held for controversial policies, such as adjustments to trade rules, to allow different ideological camps to voice their opinions[5]. Conduct "ideological impact assessments" before policymaking to identify points of conflict and

provide feedback to decision-makers. This will incorporate diverse voices to reduce implementation resistance, promote a shift from "ideological confrontation" to "ideological inclusion," and rebuild the foundation of legitimacy.

Strengthen inclusive rule design to alleviate efficiency constraints. Implement a flexible framework of "basic rules + differentiated clauses": With multilateral cooperation and moderate market opening as core fundamentals, establish "security exceptions" and "policy transition periods" for the neo-conservative camp. Optimize decision-making mechanisms and introduce "classified voting": Global public interest issues will be subject to "consensus + majority vote," with a two-thirds majority ensuring passage to avoid a single veto. Issues of core interest to member states will be prioritized through multilateral consultations, with voting held after differences are narrowed, thus reducing the constraints of ideological competition on decision-making. Enhance organizational autonomy and overcome the autonomy dilemma. At the resource level: broaden funding sources, increase co-financing from developing countries, attract private philanthropic capital, and establish a "funding transparency mechanism" to reduce major power interference. At the institutional level: strengthen the Secretariat's independence, empower it with the power to draft policies and propose agenda items, and establish a "mechanism to ensure the presence of small and medium-sized countries" to counter the influence of major powers. At the capacity level: establish a cross-disciplinary expert pool to enhance the professional level of policy research and dispute resolution, and use professional judgment to resist ideological manipulation.

These three factors provide layered support: ideological dialogue fosters consensus on rule-based inclusion, rule-based inclusion creates space for organizational autonomy, and autonomy ensures the implementation of dialogue and rules, forming a closed loop of "consensus-rules-implementation," helping organizations overcome the triple dilemma.

## 7. Conclusion

This article, through the perspective of the ideological competition between neoliberalism and neoconservatism, reveals the differential impact of these two philosophies on the roles of international organizations. The research shows that neoliberalism assigns international organizations the roles of "multilateral coordinators" and "rule-makers," while neoconservatism positions them as "instruments of major powers." This ideological divergence directly leads to organizational functional adjustments and role dilemmas. The competition of ideas has put international organizations in a triple dilemma of legitimacy, efficiency and autonomy. The key to breaking through this dilemma lies in building a dialogue mechanism for multiple ideas, strengthening the inclusiveness of rules and enhancing organizational autonomy. This conclusion reveals the conceptual logic of the evolution of the role of international organizations: roles are not determined by the system in a unilateral way, but are the result of the combined effect of ideological competition and power games. The core of optimization lies in balancing differences and maintaining autonomy. From a theoretical perspective, this article enriches the research on the role of international organizations from the perspective of ideas, and makes up for the limitation of existing research on the lack of attention to ideological variables; from a practical perspective, the optimization path provides international organizations with a way to cope with ideological differences and improve governance. This paper, however, focuses solely on two core concepts and does not address the role of other ideologies. Future research could expand the scope of these concepts and deepen multidimensional interpretations. Against the backdrop of countercurrents to globalization and intensified ideological competition, if international organizations can maintain their autonomy amidst disagreements and build inclusive frameworks, they will not only overcome their role dilemmas but also provide support for the stability of the global order and the transformation

of the governance system. This is both a core direction for the sustainable development of organizations and a crucial guarantee for the advancement of global governance.

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