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Crisis and changes in international governance in the dawn of the 21st century: rethinking the spheres of international politics

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Abstract

Although the 21st century has just begun, its turbulent start cannot be denied. In this context, this RBPI special issue addresses the impact of the 21st century systemic crises on traditional and new forms of international and regional governance. This Special issue is in line with efforts to systematize emerging agendas challenged by global changes and crises, as well as with building new approaches to analyze international relations in a plural perspective. We argue that the crises of the 21st century are producing a governance of hybrid nature, in which formal governance coexists with informal governance, presenting new theoretical and methodological challenges.

Keywords: International governance; Crisis; Changes.

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Crisis and international governance in IR: from prediction to the politics of crisis

It is not intuitive what kinds of events constitute a crisis and how these are to be analyzed and conceptualized. The rationale for designating the beginning, the end and consequences of a crisis is not precisely indicated. There is also a challenge related to the level of analysis problem. Most of the crises in the 21st century involve the interconnectedness between the national, regional and global levels. How does one build conceptual frameworks integrating these different levels of analysis?

Lipsky (2020, 2) considers crisis as “a situation that threatens significant harm to a country’s population or basic values and compels a political response under time pressure and uncertainty.” Although the three elements of threat, urgency, and uncertainty are distinctive features of the crisis, when we observe the crises of the early 21st

century these characteristics are not synchronous in a chronological sense, nor do they present the same degree of intensity (in all these three dimensions), nor are the objectives of the agency's intervention clearly outlined. Thus, the features of uncertainty, unpredictability and dynamics of unintended consequences, challenge the objectives stated by Young (1977, 6) in an initial stage of research agenda about crisis in IR: "Ultimately, the goal is to improve our collective ability to forecast domestic and international crises so that effective procedures for averting and managing them might also be developed." By incorporating Hoffmann's (2016, 55) insight, we can add that another difficulty in anticipating the international crisis is that: "the decision to classify an event as a crisis is a predominantly political process." That is, since the impact of a crisis is ultimately determined by politics, in past years the research agenda has reduced the effort to build instruments to prevent or anticipate crises and has invested in the understanding of what Lipsky (2020, 1) calls the "politics of crisis."

However, while it is correct that in essence the decision and legitimacy of what is a crisis is a political decision, there are serious risks posed by this hyper-politicized view considered by the IR field and its empirical production. This hyper-politicized perspective does not pay enough attention to the social agency's ability to intervene in legitimizing crises, especially in democratic societies. When looking at the recent past, in both the decision not to endorse the European constitution and Brexit itself, the role of social agents as legitimizing audience of such processes was immense. In other words, there is a production of governance rules that also operate through a vector that provides for bottom-up decision and production.

Lipsky (2020, 22) states that "we need to refocus our attention on the politics of crisis as a core research agenda." An evidence of this perspective is that once a crisis is deflagrated, issues like the forum or the instance to address the crisis, the discursive framing to which one refers to the crisis, the actors mobilized and the policy responses are all dynamic processes. Crises also open the door to unintended consequences beyond the control of rational actors. These developments in the research agenda are in tune with the growing influence of social perspectives in different IR approaches, drawing attention to the way problems are represented or framed and emphasizing the role of discourses, structure and agency.

An additional challenge to a systematic study relates to the type of crisis. A crisis that ends when a decision is made is unusual. Most of the crises are part of a sequential dynamic in which several decisions are taken under uncertainty and over time by a set of actors. In IR, crisis resolution involves an interactive process with external actors, which makes the analysis more complex, as this often requires understanding other actors' dynamics of action and strategies. As the crisis evolves, it is possible to observe the emergence of diverse forms of governance – vertical (or "by governments") and horizontal (or "beyond governments") – which allow the emergence of new sources of state and social power as well as the coexistence between those nation-states with institutional weaknesses and those with strong statehood. This has deepened the decline of ancient forms of governance contributing to the formation of a hybrid governance system.

The study of crises has been central in the Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) research. Crisis introduces a problem to the government's agenda and attracts the attention of political leaders

and public opinion. Therefore, crises frequently have an impact on the agenda setting. This is one of the reasons why Allison's (1971) analysis of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis is a constituent piece in FPA. There are also interesting comparative studies on how the beliefs of political leaders impact political and policymaking behavior in crisis situations. Furthermore, time constraint for a response in a crisis influences the decision-making process and affects the horizons of rationality. An additional characteristic of crisis that impacts the focus of FPA consists of crisis situations involving high-level decision-makers, examined in an environment where leaders tend to have a central role. However, crises that can be handled by high-level decision-makers can get out of control, revealing the instability of the governance rules in a given policy domain. This happens when the crisis pushes for a decline in hegemonic powers' control of certain niches of international policy decision, as it happened with the crises of the monetary and oil regimes in the 1970s. Consistently, the theory of hegemonic stability points out that the international system will find stability in the presence of a hegemon with both capacity and willingness to settle rules and absorb shocks. In the absence of this actor, the system would have difficulties solving crises or achieving levels of stability.

On the other hand, security studies have focused on the study of military crises and bargaining as a relevant research field. More recently, the interest in non-military crises has increased because of the radical changes in the pressures for stability of international security rules. Indeed, as shown by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), the understanding of war as a historic interstate institution is suffering a profound decline, while conflicts within states tend to substantially increase. For example, in 2019, only two wars were interstate in nature, while the remaining 53 wars developed as intrastate conflicts (Uppsala University 2021). Despite this observation, it should not be forgotten that some traditional processes and their governance rules, like the challenges posed by nuclear proliferation, for example, continue to be extremely relevant topics in the IR research agenda. Indeed, efforts have been made to study the empirical aspects of interactions between actors and the systemic or regional structures that condition them.

Considering the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, Broome et al. (2012, 1) developed a framework for the study of crisis and global governance focused on four key features: (1) the dynamic role played by ideas in making global governance "hang together" during periods of crisis; (2) how the crisis serves as driver of change in global governance (and why sometimes it does not); (3) how ubiquitous the global financial crisis was as an event in world politics; and (4) the conditions that constitute an event as a crisis. These are all relevant factors. IR research has well documented the role of ideas and causal frames in international politics. Furthermore, although crisis is a relatively present aspect of international relations, fundamental transformations in global governance are less common. Indeed, not all crises cause changes in normative frameworks or in the preferences or policies of actors. As Berman (2020) points out, major upheavals bring systemic change only when reformers have a plan and the power to implement it, although this does not always happen. At the same time, as Hurrell (2016, 16-17) correctly observes, "the fact that parallel political crises are happening in so many different places strongly suggests that global and systemic factors must be at work."

Lipsky (2020, 13) has affirmed that “the global nature of contemporary crises necessitates renewed attention to systemic sources of instability.” But what are the systemic sources of instability? Brecher and Yehuda (1985, 23) consider that a systemic crisis can be defined as a situational change characterized by two necessary and sufficient conditions: “(1) an increase in the intensity of *disruptive interactions* among systemic actors, and (2) an incipient change within the *structure* of an international system, more precisely, in one or more structural attributes — power distribution, actors/regimes, rules and alliance configuration.” However, although the intensity of interactions among actors of different nature is correct, so also including the virtual actors of the cyberspace, the idea that the structural features might remain tied to Waltz’s hypotheses (1979) that emphasize the enormous continuity of the systemic conditions in the international distribution of power, seems to lose consistency. While Waltz’s premise remained very ingrained among realist and liberal scholars, the different political capacity achieved by different actors in the developing world, such as China, India, Brazil and Russia who question the rules of governance, moving from rule takers to rule makers of international standards and governance, evidences changes in systemic power that are neither negligible nor insignificant (Kenkel and Destradi 2019).

These findings can best be captured by an analytical distinction between crisis of the global order and challenges to specific norms or power constellations within the order. Eilstrup-Sangiovani (2020, 1) point out that “What we witness at present is not so much a profound or definitive crisis of the existing order, but rather its ongoing (and messy) *transformation* into a broader, more inclusive system of global governance, reflecting the need to accommodate new actors and problems.” Therefore, a notable fact about informal and ad-hoc groups of governance concerns the limited studies about issues of power and legitimacy. If on the one hand, the lack of rules of action and institutional parameters offers celerity and greater autonomy, on the other, it raises concerns regarding legitimacy, selectivity and power asymmetries. In this perspective, Mello (2020) has defined the OECD enlargement in recent years as an important dimension to understand variations of clusters, organizations and global governance mechanisms.

In fact, what could be happening is that if the rules and institutions of international cooperation do not keep up with the changes in the economy and international politics, the system will present vulnerabilities in the prevention and, mainly, in the management of the effects of crisis. Some instances like the G-20 gained momentum after the 2008 financial crisis but, even if the reasons for a crisis are known, and decreasing the possibility of future crises implies changing the policy of relevant actors, this possibility cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, the 2008 financial crisis highlighted the insufficiency of international cooperation mechanisms to manage the depth and complexity of international finance. The G-20 has tried to be an answer to this shortage, but its results, especially after 2011, have been increasingly limited (Ramos et al. 2012). Evidently, a fundamental shift in the crises affecting the international governance is that the factual and analytical level will incorporate an enlargement that encompasses the global, the state and even the region. Nolte and Weiffen (2021) analyze the impact of crisis in regionalism which can induce regionalism or serve as a pushback against it. What is interesting from this

perspective is a nuanced view on the impact of the crisis in regionalism, as well as an emerging research agenda on similarities and differences on how regionalisms respond to crisis and which factors affect the type of responses presented.

Reasonably, the processes of norms production and even the analysis describing the behavior of the actors who, intentionally or unintentionally, produce governance mechanisms inside or outside the nation-state have been summarized. However, the motivations of those who are in the production of governance have not been studied. The volume edited by Acharya (2016) examines what motivates actors to participate in global governance. Contrary to most of the literature that focuses on the actors and institutions of global governance, the book examines the demand side for global governance by focusing on five determinants: strategic, functional, normative, domestic politics and regionalism. One of the arguments states that “global governance institutions and processes are what their demanders make of them” (Acharya 2016, 4-5). Following Acharya (2016, 6), we assume that global governance involves “formal or informal management of cross-border issues affecting a significant proportion of the international system by states, international institutions and non-state actors, through power, functional cooperation, laws, regimes and norms.” This definition includes intergovernmental cooperation and institutions as well as non-state actors. A significant starting point is that issue-area matters. Each issue area can pursue a specific configuration of actors, trajectory and power structure. Among the findings of Acharya, (2016, 273) volume results that “the demand for global governance is not simply rising in a linear fashion across all issue areas.” This means that there are differences among issue areas such as climate change, refugees, health and finances. In some areas, more than others, the demand for global governance is more crisis-driven, and these differences need to be better understood. Thus, Weiss (2000, 808) considers that “global governance should perhaps be seen as a heuristic device to capture and describe the confusing and seemingly ever-accelerating transformation of the international system.”

On the same line of argument, Barnett (2020, 132) points out that “the ability of states and societies to remove suffering and save lives in a continuous manner depended on administration and governance.” We argue that the crises of the 21st century are producing a governance of hybrid nature, in which formal governance coexists with informal governance. In this hybrid governance the regional production of norms and the destabilization of new and old ways overlap with global governance, and the political actors, such as states, compete in the production of legitimate forms of governance by domestic or regional social actors. This situation presents new theoretical and methodological challenges to IR.

Performing crises and governance in the 21st century

Although the 21st century has just begun, its turbulent start cannot be denied. In the last two decades, successive crises of different nature have occurred, starting with those related to

the attacks of September 11 of 2001. In 2008, the first major financial crisis of the century had enormous social and economic consequences. Among the political crises that have hit this “short 21st century,” perhaps the main one is the weakening of the European Union’s community project, due to the painful political process of Britain’s exit from the European Union, known as Brexit. Subsequently, political crises have intensified around the world because of international political realignments derived from the strong emergence of conservative governments in Europe, North America and Latin America. Despite their differences, these conservative governments generate new demands and agendas for foreign policy and global governance, ushering new political and normative challenges for international cooperation.

These crises in politics and the economy have not been temporary or limited. Over the years, their effects have penetrated several regions of the world, parallel to the spread of systemic crises. Humanitarian crises appeared from Sudan to Venezuela, coinciding with great activism by violent social actors; refugee crises have spread from Syria to Italy, across Europe and Latin America, while environmental crises have flared up from Australia and the Amazon. Moreover, the latest crisis, the global public health one generated by the spread of Covid-19, is another cumulative crisis with far-reaching impacts around the globe. Hence, the understanding of this 21st century crisis cannot occur by solely looking at individual cases, as something more global seems to strongly be at work.

But how does the discipline of international relations react to all these fast-paced facts? The truth is that, as Ahmed (2011, 342-344) argues, “for the most part, IR as a discipline has not fully acknowledged the real-world scale of these crises as inherently interdependent phenomena requiring an integrated and holistic theoretical appraisal.” Probably the speed of the facts - and of the crises themselves - has been so fast that theories and concepts of IR do not respond with the same speed and have difficulty unraveling the meanings of the ongoing processes.

The inconsistency of the IR discipline in monitoring the crises and changes in international governance in the dawn of the 21st century deepens as traditional governance, that is, the set of rules regulating the life of national and international society (in the form of regional or global multilateralism) seems narrow to manage the new dynamics. In this context, the main source of regulation – the state – has been tensioned, and societies are witnessing the emergence of new forms of formal and informal governance. The informal governance ranges from informal regional political agreements, along the lines of Prosur or the Lima Group, in Latin America, or the Frugal Four, in Europe – their differences notwithstanding – (Mijares and Nolte 2018), to new forms of governance generated by non-state agents working in fields such as trade, environment and human rights, up to forms of informal governance offered by transnational “outlaw” agents (Arjona et al. 2015; Villa et al. 2019). Morosini and Sanchez Badin (2018, 2) documented that selected developing countries “have created new model investment agreements and/or reformed existing national laws to respond to the legitimacy crisis of the investment regime in ways that differ substantially from the manner more developed countries have chosen to respond.” The pluralization of the agency in global governance and the changes in the international balance of

power established a situation where the institutions built under American hegemony are no longer the only instances in global governance (Ket 2013). At the same time, there is no consensus or agreed-upon plans for what kind of institutions and mechanisms should replace the old ones. A clear example of this consists of the flexibility with which regional actors, such as China, Russia, and Brazil, infiltrate the interests of their foreign policy or of their private actors in regions other than those of origin. Indeed, there are a lot of financial investments from China in Africa and in Latin America, and there are also those from Brazil in Asia and Africa.

Attempts have been made to rethink how crises have also affected regionalism and its more mature experiences in Western Europe, Africa, Latin America and Asia (Saurugger and Terpan 2018). In other words, it is not a question of rethinking regionalism itself, but how its practices and integration projects have been affected or reconfigured by the ongoing systemic and regional pressures. The inability of regionalism to overcome crises has increased conflicts and pressures for disintegration (Ramanzini Junior et al. 2021). Despite the existence of mechanisms such as Custom Unions and Democratic Clauses in the various regions of the world, there remains the difficulty of building social bonds sufficient to maintain the cohesion of the integrative process, especially in the face of moments of political and economic crisis. A less studied topic is how the regional level of interactions, crises and disintegration in this sphere relates to global governance. Most of the discussion focuses on the opposite, which is how the global level affects regionalism. But, states and non-state actors are likely to change their international preferences or identities based on regional processes of socialization, reframing their perceptions and interests for or against global governance issues. Nonetheless, it is also very important to highlight the role of rising powers in crisis management, considering the new positions assumed by China (for example the management of ethnic minority crises in the Tibetan areas and Xinjiang; the managing of pandemic and epidemic crises as well as of environmental crises and natural disasters) (Chung 2016), or also by Brazil, during the period of UNASUR, for the management of the Bolivian crisis of 2008 that threatened to territorially divide the country, or in dealing with the Venezuelan crises of the first decade of this century (Villa and Vianna 2010).

How have these systemic and regional crises impacted and reconfigured the changes in traditional international governance? In other words, how do global crises affect the set of rules and norms in the form of international regimes or international organizations that govern the international society? Who are the new agents of international governance and what are their governance dynamics? How do crises generate new demands and foster new forms of global (dis)governance?

Finally, issues in global security-related agencies, their scope, significance, and shortcomings can be affected by these international pressures, but they can also affect national and regional security and defense corporations and bureaucracy. This is owed to the long-lasting and far-reaching impacts that the securitization of crises has on institutions, governments and even the perceptions of threats or the cooperation that societies have. Recent developments around the world, as humanitarian and refugee crises and violence within the state, so called “new wars” by some researchers, have downsized the role of peacekeeping, especially in poor countries and in the developing world.

How will those security institutions, privileged by the UN in the post-Cold War era as collective security mechanisms, be affected by systemic crises? How have institutional security and defense structures been affected at the regional level? Was the structure of international threats challenged by the crises? How and on what issues have relations between foreign policies, security and defense agencies been affected by the crises? Finally, the systematic analysis of the crisis could have some prescriptive and political implications.

In this context, this Special Issue addresses the impact of 21st century systemic crises on traditional and new forms of international and regional governance. This Special Issue is in line with efforts to systematize emerging agendas challenged by global changes and crises during the first two decades of the 21st century, as well as with building new approaches to analyze international relations in a plural perspective.

The article “The Copenhagen School in South America: the (de)securitization of UNASUR (2008-2017)” written by Jose Antonio Sanahuja et al. (2021), examines the most significant processes of securitization and desecuritization that have occurred at the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) from its inception in 2008 until 2017. To this end, the paper is based on a critical theory of security with a focus on securitization and offers an expanded and/or discursive conception of security that transcends the military dimension. The aspect of governance in South America also appears in the contribution of Pedro Barros and Julia Borba de Souza Gonçalves. Their article “Crisis in South American regionalism and Brazilian protagonism in Unasur, Lima Group and Prosur” assesses the crisis of regional governance in South America, from 2017 onwards, analyzing the emergence of regional initiatives (Lima Group, Prosur, and Pact of Leticia) and their agendas to replace Unasur’s role, and how they are the results of global (Brexit, rising nationalism, protest against institutions) and regional (Venezuelan crisis, political polarization, economic disintegration) events (Barros and Gonçalves 2021).

In the enlightening and acute analysis of the contribution “How regional organizations cope with recurrent stress: the case of South America,” Brigitte Weiffen and Detlef Nolte (2021) provide an analytical framework that systematizes stress factors for regionalism and describes the characteristics that help a region to cope with stress. Drawing on psychological models of how individuals cope with stress, the authors discuss two recent crises in South American regionalism: the political crisis in Venezuela and the Covid-19 pandemic. Another relevant conceptual contribution is represented by the work of Karina Pasquariello Mariano, Regiane Bressan Nitsch, and Luciano Bruno Theodoro (Mariano et al. 2021). In the paper “Liquid Regionalism: A Typology For Regionalism In The Americas” the authors argue that regionalism in the Americas has experienced a new wave in recent years, which characterizes itself as “Liquid Regionalism” given the fluidity, informality and limited institutional design of the new regional projects. The article introduces a new typology to characterize regional projects in the Americas, dividing them into platforms for consultation, cooperation and regional integration.

Another contribution on the subject of governance and crisis in regionalism is the article by Concepción Anguita Olmedo and Carolina Sampó (2021) entitled “The case of migrant women

from the Central American Northern Triangle: How to prevent exploitation and violence during the crossing.” The authors focus on the case of migrant women and the research has relevant academic and political implications. Indeed, one of the conclusions states that an orderly and regular mobility would protect migrant women from the dangers and violence to which they are exposed. To this end, migration governance seems to be necessary. In the article “The EU’s and Russia’s rally in Moldova: the EU external governance to the Eastern borders” Ana Paula Tostes and Yasmin Sande Renni (2021) show that the geopolitical condition in Eastern Europe determines a new dynamic of governance in the EU, demonstrating that EU Foreign and Security policies require special attention to the countries located in the Russian zone of influence. The authors choose to analyze the Europeanization of the Republic of Moldova as a case for a critical view of the modern dynamic of EU governance at the eastern borders.

Augusto César Dall’Agnol and Marco Cepik (2021), in the manuscript entitled “The Demise of the INF Treaty: A Path Dependence Analysis”, make an original contribution to the debate proposed by this Special Issue by explaining strategic stability as a critical informal international institution through a framework of path dependence. On the issue of formal and informal dimensions of governance, Marília Pimenta et al. (2021), in the article “Hybrid Governance from Global to Local: an analysis of disputes among state and non-state actors in Rio de Janeiro’s social spaces”, expand the concept of hybrid governance and analyze the case of Rio Janeiro, where criminal control coexists with the state. In the article “Internet Governance Is What Global Stakeholders Make of It: A Tripolar Approach”, Jaqueline Trevisan Pigatto et al. (2021) identify the configuration of Internet governance in 2021 and the challenges at stake in a time of transition, when nation states and private companies are in a dispute over institutional representation and legitimacy. The authors point out that the United States, the European Union, and China constitute a tripolar arrangement, each of which promotes a distinct mode of governance that entails different implications for the future of this agenda.

Samuel Conde Amorim and Laura Ferreira-Pereira (2021) discuss the subject of “Brazil’s Quest for Autonomy in Asia: The Role of Strategic Partnerships with China and Japan”. The authors examine the strategic partnership that Brazil developed with China and Japan, between 2003 and 2020, evaluating how these privileged relationships have contributed to the country’s quest for autonomy. The issue is examined through the lens of Pragmatic Institutionalism and against the backdrop of major developments in global and regional governance that have had an impact on the Brazilian autonomist project. Also focused on Brazil and introducing a conceptual contribution on the relationship between governance and norms, Francisca Costa Reis (2021) in her article “What doesn’t kill a norm makes it stronger? Brazil’s contestation of the responsibility to protect” analyses Brazil’s challenges to the responsibility to protect through an empirical analysis that makes use of recent research on the possible alternative endings of challenge. The author argues that the nature of the contestation allows for greater nuances and broader reflections on the possibility that the challenges serve as a way for future cooperation. In “BRICS and Brazilian public opinion: soft balancing or economic strategy?” Ivan Filipe Almeida Lopes Fernandes, Janina

Onuki, and Vinicius Ruiz Albino de Freitas (2021) examine the attitudes of Brazilians towards the BRICS, verifying whether the soft balancing strategy finds support in national public opinion. They conclude that Brazilian attitudes toward BRICS countries, especially China, are similar to attitudes toward other relevant partners and affect the view on BRICS, even though they are not correlated to a rejection of the USA.

In a context where societies around the world are witnessing the emergence of new forms of formal and informal governance and traditional multilateralism faces structural challenges to advance international cooperation, and by considering the findings of the research of this Special Issue, we identify some paths for future research which we consider particularly important:

- (i) Changes in the concepts, practices and methodologies of international governance approaches;
- (ii) Variations on who the agents and actors of international governance are today;
- (iii) Pressures on traditional forms of governance organized in the form of regimes and multilateralism;
- (iv) Transformations in regionalism induced by international crises;
- (v) The emergence of forms of informal political regionalism in the Global South, driven by nationalist or conservative governments;
- (vi) New forms of informal governance inside and outside the law;
- (vii) Pressures on state security governance and their consequences;
- (viii) Reactions of international powers to changes in formal and informal governance; and
- (ix) Great and intermediate power responses to the challenges that have emerged in global and regional governance.

Therefore, while offering theoretical and methodological insights relevant to a better understanding of the crisis and to rethink the spheres of international politics, this Special Issue strengthens venues for new research.

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