Trilemma Tradeoffs in International Relations: An Analytical Framework

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Over the past fifty years, scholars have drawn attention to the consequences of trying to overcome openness/effectiveness/autonomy trilemmas, especially in monetary policy and trade policy. Despite this, few have noticed the ubiquity of such policy trilemmas in international relations. This article presents a comprehensive analytical framework that captures the core concepts and causal mechanisms relevant to understanding these trilemmas, and identifies opportunities for future research. The first section provides an analytical review of openness/effectiveness/autonomy trilemmas. By doing so, it highlights three features of trilemmas: that goal attainment is a question of degree, that goal attainment varies across time, and that policy constraints affect states asymmetrically. The second section presents a typology of trilemma-based policy goals (openness, regulatory effectiveness, and policymaking autonomy) and associated “disciplining” mechanisms that explain the likelihood of trilemma tradeoffs (i.e., market-based, politics-based, and law-based mechanisms). The third section shows how the trilemma framework presented in this article can facilitate the empirical study of threefold policy tradeoffs in all aspects of international relations, including security and defense.

Ces 50 dernières années, les chercheurs ont attiré l’attention sur les conséquences des tentatives de dépassement du trilème entre ouverture, efficacité et autonomie, surtout en politique monétaire et en politique commerciale. Néanmoins, peu ont remarqué l’omniprésence de tels trilemmes politiques en relations internationales. Cet article présente un cadre analytique complet qui reprend les concepts fondamentaux et mécanismes causaux pertinents dans la compréhension de ces trilemmes, avant d’identifier de nouvelles pistes de recherche. La première partie propose un passage en revue analytique des trilemmes entre ouverture, efficacité et autonomie. Ce faisant, elle met en évidence trois de leurs caractéristiques : la réalisation d’un objectif est une question de degré, elle varie dans le temps et les contraintes politiques ont une influence asymétrique sur les États. Dans une deuxième partie figure une présentation d’une typologie des objectifs politiques fondés sur des dilemmes (ouverture, efficacité réglementaire et autonomie politique) et des mécanismes associés qui expliquent la probabilité des compromis de trilème (c’est-à-dire, les mécanismes fondés sur les marchés, la politique ou la loi). La troisième partie montre que le cadre de trilème présenté dans cet article peut faciliter l’étude empirique des triples compromis politiques dans tous les aspects de relations internationales, notamment la sécurité et la défense.

A lo largo de los últimos 50 años, los académicos han llamado la atención sobre las consecuencias de tratar de superar los trilemas apertura/eficacia/autonomía, especialmente en los ámbitos de la política monetaria y la política comercial. A pesar de ello, pocos se han dado cuenta de la ubicuidad de estos trilemas políticos dentro de las relaciones internacionales. Este artículo presenta un marco analítico integral que captura los conceptos centrales y los mecanismos causales relevantes necesarios para poder comprender estos trilemas e identifica oportunidades para futuras investigaciones. En la primera sección se presenta una revisión analítica de los trilemas apertura/eficacia/autonomía. Al hacer esto, el artículo pone de relieve tres características de los trilemas: que el logro de los objetivos es un cuestion de grado, que el logro de los objetivos varía a lo largo del tiempo y que las restricciones políticas afectan a los Estados de manera asimétrica. En la segunda sección se presenta una tipología de objetivos políticos basados en trilemas (apertura, eficacia regulatoria y autonomía en la formulación de políticas), así como mecanismos asociados que explican la probabilidad de que se produzcan compromisos entre trilemas (es decir, mecanismos basados en el mercado, en la política y en el derecho). La tercera sección muestra cómo el marco del trilema presentado en este artículo puede facilitar el estudio empírico de los tres compromisos políticos en todos los aspectos de las relaciones internacionales, incluyendo la seguridad y la defensa.

Introduction

Trilemmas, where three alternatives are mutually exclusive, are rife in international macroeconomics, and over the past fifty years, many economists have drawn attention to the consequences of trying to overcome trilemma tradeoffs in monetary, finance, trade, and labor policy (see Bordo and James 2015, 2019, 2022; James and Bordo 2015; Lane 2017).

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In the field of international relations (IR), Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (1977) identified tensions between openness and policymaking autonomy that were quite similar to the tensions found in the trilemmas of international macroeconomics. Since then, many in IR have studied similar dilemmas, e.g., in European Union (EU) integration studies (Hooghe and Marks 2009; De Wilde 2011, 571; Leruth, Gänzle, and Trondl 2019). Only a few IR scholars, however, have attempted to apply macroeconomic trilemma frameworks to other areas of IR.

This article presents an analysis of macroeconomic trilemmas and argues that similar trilemmas, or at least trilemma tradeoffs, can be found in other policy sectors in all ar-
of IR. Trilemmas, in other words, should be seen as “an encompassing process observable in different manifestations” (De Wilde 2011, 560), even beyond economics. To make this argument, the article proceeds in three steps. The first section presents an analytical review of macroeconomic trilemmas and highlights three caveats: that goal attainment is a question of degree, that goal attainment varies across time, and that policy constraints affect states asymmetrically. The result of this first section is a novel, comprehensive IR trilemma framework that can facilitate the analysis of openness-related tradeoffs in other policy sectors. The second section presents a typology of trilemma-based policy goals (openness, regulatory effectiveness, and policymaking autonomy), and associated “disciplining” mechanisms that explain the likelihood of trilemma tradeoffs (i.e., market-based, politics-based, and law-based mechanisms). The typology and associated mechanisms will help scholars analyze systematically the effects of openness on effective regulation and policymaking autonomy, and the asymmetric effects thereof. The third section shows how the trilemma framework presented in this article can facilitate the empirical study of policy tradeoffs in all areas of IR, including security and defense. In doing so, it demonstrates that trilemma tradeoffs are not only rife in international macroeconomics, but possibly also in IR writ large.

Policy Trilemmas in International Macroeconomics

While the term dilemma is ubiquitous in both lay language and academic discourse, the term trilemma is less common. This first section introduces the notion of policy trilemmas. Here, the disciplinary focus is on international macroeconomics and international political economy, as it is in these fields of research that trilemma-based frameworks are most often applied. By considering the flow of capital, goods, as well as services and persons from an economic perspective, IR scholars can better understand the strengths and limitations of trilemma-based studies. The latter also provides clues as to how these flows, and the regulation thereof, might be studied from other perspectives. This initial macroeconomic analysis also serves as a foundation for the subsequent conceptual synthesis in the second section, which presents a typology of policy goals and disciplining mechanisms to be used beyond economics. As mentioned, the third section provides “proof of concept” illustrations, focusing on security and defense.\(^1\)

Monetary Policy

The most famous policy trilemma pertains to monetary policy. In 1999, Robert Mundell received the Nobel Prize in economic sciences “for his analysis of monetary and fiscal policy under different exchange rate regimes” (Nobel Media 1999). One of the arguments that led to Mundell’s (and J. Marcus Fleming’s) fame was the principle that under (i) “perfect” capital mobility and (ii) fixed exchange rates, monetary and fiscal policy cannot (iii) serve domestic goals, such as high employment and low inflation (Fleming 1962; Mundell 1963; Cohen 2000). According to the trilemma of monetary policy, polities that simultaneously pursue these three goals (i.e., free capital “flows,” a fixed exchange rate, and autonomous monetary policy) eventually endure a monetary crisis, and ultimately one of the goals will be missed (Krugman 1999).

As developed in the second section, these three policy goals can be referred to more generally as openness, the effective regulation, and policymaking autonomy. But before reviewing other economic policy trilemmas, it is important to identify the processes that “discipline” monetary policymakers, i.e., the processes that, in the end, limit the successful simultaneous pursuit of the three goals in question. In the trilemma of monetary policy, the central (but arguably not only) disciplining process is currency speculation. If a central bank sets an interest rate different from that of other central banks (in order to stabilize the domestic economy in relation to employment and prices, for example), free capital flows will allow investors to take advantage of interest rate differences (a form of “arbitrage”) (Obstfeld 2015, 12). This, in turn, will affect currency valuations, undermining any preexisting fixed exchange rate. To maintain an exchange rate, central bank foreign exchange intervention will be required. In the end, either the exchange rate will no longer be fixed (i.e., it will be allowed to “float”), capital controls will be introduced, or autonomous monetary policy (dedicated to domestic economic stability) will be abandoned. When faced with such a crisis, “pegs”\(^3\) are often abandoned, not only due to the market mechanism that is currency speculation, but also due to political considerations:

very few central banks will cling to an exchange-rate target without regard to what is happening in the rest of the economy. Domestic political realities simply will not allow it, even when agreements with foreign governments are at stake. (Obstfeld and Rogoff 1995, 79)

Currency speculation by hedge funds and the like are called “attacks” because they are in essence inimical bets that central bankers will eventually favor domestic economic stability. While exaggerated, the martial terminology of speculative “attacks” signals that the trilemma framework might be of use to those studying so-called economic warfare, i.e., the coercive use of economic instruments (boycotts, embargos, targeted sanctions,\(^4\) asset seizures, etc.) for political ends. These parallels and potentials are further developed in the second and third sections.

The main argument of this article is that the trilemma of monetary policy provides concepts and models that will be of use to a wider group of IR scholars, beyond economics. According to the trilemma of monetary policy, states with (i) free capital flows and (ii) a pegged currency cannot also (iii) use monetary policy for domestic economic goals, such as high employment or low inflation, and maximize all three goals.\(^5\) This argument has implications for long-running structure/agency debates in IR, which will be briefly explored in the second section. The point to retain here is that all policy choices have consequences, some of which, given the gamut of other policy goals pursued, are virtually inevitable. At the same time, the other implication to retain is

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\(^1\)In addition to mathematical, philosophical, semantic, and theological trilemmas, scholars have identified many policy trilemmas (e.g., project management, energy, space, countersurgency, peacekeeping, and sectarianism) (Klein 2008; Zambernardi 2010; Khan and Sadeh 2019; Williams 2020; World Energy Council 2022; Chen 2023). Due to space limitations, the third section will only focus on applications that relate to an openness/regulatory effectiveness/policymaking autonomy trilemma.

\(^2\)N.b. In the context of monetary policy, crises occur because exchange rate management and domestic policy goals are pursued with the same “instrument,” namely monetary policy.

\(^3\)To peg a currency is to fix the exchange rate with a foreign currency, set of currencies, or precious metal. Typically, central banks use monetary policy to (try to) maintain the peg.

\(^4\)Bordo and James (2022) recently noted the relevance of trilemma-based frameworks for studying sanctions.

\(^5\)Of course, other policy instruments, such as fiscal policy, might be available.
that, no matter what some might say, policymakers always have alternatives. Any policy trilemma entails both trade-offs and freedom of choice (i.e., agency). Firstly, policy goals (e.g., exchange rate stability, high employment, and low inflation) are always based on particular interests and values, which need not necessarily be endorsed and pursued. Secondly, disciplining mechanisms are always somewhat indeterminate. This highlights the agency of other stakeholders, such as other branches of government, lobbyists, citizens, or even international organizations (IOs) and other states. Currency speculation and other types of disciplining mechanisms are never coercive and certain to the point of determining outcomes (see Pauly 1995, 372; Stein 2016, 307). Identifying these brief moments of agency (possibly via the modeling of an influence diagram) could be one of the aims of a trilemma-based research project.

More recent research on the trilemma of monetary policy can also inform reflections on the degree to which states might be able to overcome supposedly “impossible” trinities. When applying the trilemma framework beyond economics, IR scholars should keep two caveats in mind. One is that policy goals can be partly met (what political scientist Giovanni Sartori called “degreeism”), and the second is that the risk of losing policymaking autonomy is higher for some states than others (referred to here as “power asymmetries,” a subset of which are “asymmetric dependencies”).

Regarding the maximization of policy goals, we can note that policy goals such as frictionless capital flows, fixed exchange rates, and complete monetary policymaking autonomy are ideals. Consequently, macroeconomists often measure degrees of openness, degrees of exchange rate variation, and degrees of policymaking autonomy. The favored metaphor here is to visualize the trilemma as a triangle and degreeism as a “rounding” of the trilemma’s “corners” (Obstfeld, Shambaugh, and Taylor 2005; Bordo and James 2015, 2; Stein 2016, 315–6, 327; Bordo and James 2022). Aizenmann (2013), for example, is in favor of degreeism, especially when measuring capital controls. Likewise, Michael Klein and Jay Shambaugh (2015) find that “a moderate amount” of exchange rate flexibility allows “for some degree” of monetary policymaking autonomy, “especially in emerging and developing economies.” In sum, policy goals and their contraries are best conceptualized not as dichotomies but rather as the extreme ends of a policy continuum.

An important corollary to the degreeism argument is the asymmetric dependency caveat. According to Keohane and Nye:

We must also be careful not to define interdependence entirely in terms of situations of evenly balanced mutual dependence. It is asymmetries in dependence that are most likely to provide sources of influence for actors in their dealings with one another. Less dependent actors can often use the interdependent relationship as a source of power in bargaining over an issue and perhaps to affect other issues. At the other extreme from pure symmetry is pure dependence (sometimes disguised by calling the situation interdependence); but it too is rare. Most cases lie between these two extremes. And that is where the heart of the political bargaining process of interdependence lies. (2012, 9)

As a result of asymmetric dependency, some states have fewer policy options than others. Regarding monetary policy, for example, the widespread use of US dollars (USD) as a reserve, debt, and payment currency allows US policymakers to raise revenue through money printing (i.e., seigniorage), borrow at lower interest rates, accumulate trade deficits, and apply significant sanctions—what Valéry Giscard d’Estaing called the “exorbitant privilege” (Rickards 2015; Gourinchas and Rey 2022).7 Reversely, even with flexible exchange rates, the monetary policy of many smaller and “emerging” states might still not be fully autonomous (Pauly 1995, 379; Bordo and James 2015; Rey 2015, 3). This caveat to trilemma tradeoffs should be of great interest to IR scholars studying power politics, geopolitics, and hierarchies in IR. Debates around a possible “de-dollarization,”8 for example, are familiar to many IR scholars (see Arslanalp, Eichengreen, and Simpson-Bell 2022). The finer point is that when the trilemma is applied to other policy sectors, some states will be more at risk of losing policymaking autonomy than others due to their asymmetric dependency. In this sense, the trilemma framework draws attention to power asymmetries inherent to even nominally cooperative and “friendly” relations.

In sum, when conceptualizing a generic policy trilemma, scholars must keep in mind that (i) policy goals can be partially reached, and (ii) an axiomatic trilemma might not be generalizable to all states. Degreeism and asymmetric power relations must be at the center of any trilemma-based analysis. In other words, the main argument here is that instead of discussing a law-like “trilemma,” the more nuanced terminology of “trilemma tradeoffs” is preferable. Indeed, pace Sartori, if the comprehensive, generic trilemma is used as an analytical framework, results will certainly be more complex and insightful than a simple dichotomous conceptualization would allow. The rest of this section explores trilemma applications in three other economic sectors. Identifying the features common to all applications will help IR scholars transpose the trilemma framework to new policy sectors, beyond economics.

### Financial Policy

When applying concepts, models, and theories to a larger set of cases (by exploring new regions or policy sectors, for example), one must avoid what Sartori referred to as “concept stretching,” namely, the misapplication of a concept to a new set of cases (see Sartori, Rigg, and Teune 1975; Sartori 1987, 1991; Collier and Mahon 1993; Collier and Levitsky 2009). To avoid this mistake, the specifics of potential new cases must be carefully considered, and, if necessary, the original concept should be made more abstract. In the case of the policy trilemma framework, both policy goals and disciplining mechanisms must be conceived in a more generic way, lest stretching occur. Fortunately, several scholars have already started to climb the metaphorical “ladder of abstraction” and have developed a broader notion of international trilemmas, which makes the framework applicable to finance (Thygesen 2003; Schoenmaker 2011; Dymski 2014; Lane 2017), trade (Rodrik 2011), labor (Dahrendorf 1996; Delvik and Visser 2009), and even security and

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6 Scholars have made similar arguments concerning German monetary policymaking in the late 1980s, albeit vis-à-vis other European policymakers (Padoa-Schioppa 1982, 36–57; Andrews 1994, 212).

7 Hélène Rey and colleagues argue that in addition to enjoying an exorbitant privilege, historically, the United States has also responded to an “exorbitant duty” by providing payments during crises. “The hegemon provides insurance to the rest of the world in exchange for an insurance premium” (Gourinchas and Rey 2022).

8 That is, lessening the role of the USD as a reserve currency, conducting trade with domestic currencies, and creating new currency unions.
defense (Franko 2014; Boudet 2020; Droff and Malizard 2023a, b).

Dirk Schoenmaker (2011, 2013) has argued that policymakers face a financial trilemma, which makes it impossible to simultaneously obtain (i) an internationally integrated financial system, (ii) financial stability, and (iii) autonomous financial policymaking. Studying the case of the EU, Schoenmaker contends that because Europe’s financial system is increasingly integrated and financial policies (e.g., restrictions on various types of borrowing and lending, deposit insurance, and “bailouts”) are mostly dealt with by states, financial instability (i.e., bank and market failures) must ensue. In this scenario, the trilemma’s market-based disciplining process comes from regulatory arbitrage (i.e., jurisdiction “shopping”), which in turn (after an economic or financial “shock”) leads to financial instability (Cerutti, Claessens, and Laeven 2017; Obstfeld 2017). As such a scenario, options include closing national markets (e.g., capital controls, “ring-fenced” banks), supranational regulation, or tolerating financial instability (e.g., market and bank failures), which might be politically costly (cf. Schoenmaker 2011, 14; 2013). As with monetary policy, the financial trilemma shows that alternatives are always available, but that these also entail tradeoffs. The financial trilemma also gives some credence to neofunctionalist theory, where integration in one policy sector (e.g., trade) can “spillover” into another (e.g., finance), often via the advent of perceived negative externalities.

IR scholars eager to apply the trilemma framework beyond economics should note the simple logic that underpins all of the macroeconomic trilemmas presented in the first section: When actors, be they individuals or organizations, can cross borders and choose between several jurisdictions with nonharmonized regulations, said actors can also profit from arbitrage opportunities and “shop” for the best jurisdictions. This applies to virtually all sectors and phenomena, from currencies, banking, trade, services, and labor to tax avoidance and evasion, asylum, and all sorts of smuggling and trafficking. In fact, increased regulation and criminalization de facto create licit and illicit business opportunities for entrepreneurial individuals and organizations. As explored in the third section, the question to ask in each case is: Under which circumstances might disciplining mechanisms coerce a government into abandoning the maximization of either openness, regulatory effectiveness, or policymaking autonomy?

Trade Policy

Clearly the trilemmas mentioned above something to do with debates on “globalization,” the increase of cross-border movement, and reductions in the social significance of space-time. To best understand the relation between globalization and the trilemma framework, one can consider Dani Rodrik’s “political trilemma of the world economy,” which, like the Mundell–Fleming trilemma, is both well-known and somewhat contested. The Harvard economist argued that (i) international economic integration (including capital, goods, services, and labor), (ii) territorial jurisdiction, and (iii) democratic politics could not coexist (Rodrik 2000, 180; 2011, 200–5). We can immediately note both similarities with and differences from the monetary and financial trilemmas. Regarding the terms, Rodrik’s “globalization” is akin to openness, his “national sovereignty” is akin to policymaking autonomy (de jure at least), and his “democracy” is akin to effective regulation of goods and capital (as opposed to the deregulation of the neoliberal era). According to Rodrik, the frictionless flow of money and goods across borders can be called “hyperglobalization.” Certainly, in the current geopolitical context, Rodrik’s terms “national sovereignty” and “democracy” are somewhat confusing, especially considering that “sovereignty” might entail following policies crafted and prescribed by the US-led International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and “democracy” might entail increased regulation by supranational entities such as the EU, which is often accused of having a “democratic deficit” itself. But in the neoliberal context, these terms made sense. “Sovereignty” was often understood in opposition to global governance, and “democracy” was often understood in opposition to policies promoted within the Washington Consensus. The three policy options that Rodrik presented are certainly clear: According to Rodrik, governments must choose between (i) a neoliberal model with little regulation (policy is focused on reducing transaction costs), (ii) an autarchic model with less openness (as seen under Breton Woods), or (iii) a supranational model with little policymaking at the state level.

According to Rodrik, what the journalist Thomas Friedman called the “golden straightjacket”12 was in fact neither golden nor a straightjacket (e.g., 2011, 189). Rodrik’s objective was to indicate what he thought were normatively better alternatives (thereby ne-politicizing trade policy debates that the likes of Margaret Thatcher had tried to depoliticize). During the neoliberal era, he and others argued that a “race to the bottom” was underway (also known as the “Delaware effect”). To attract trade and foreign direct investment, many governments were reducing regulations and taxation. Poorer states that failed to follow this deregulatory consensus faced the risk of not attracting capital, notably due to the role of New York and London-based rating agencies (hence Friedman’s notion of a “straightjacket”) (Barta and Makszin 2021). Initially, Rodrik had suggested that policymakers might best favor democracy and globalization over national sovereignty, i.e., that they embrace “global governance.”13 With time, however, Rodrik, like many others, became more skeptical about the possibility of global or even regional governance. In 2016, for example, he wrote that he had been wrong to argue that the EU could successfully combine economic integration with supranational demo-
ocratic policymaking (Rodrik 2016). Today, he advocates more firmly for more localized, democratic regulation:

What he calls “maximum globalization” or “hyroglob-
alization” can work only if all countries adopt the same set of rules that are overseen by an accountable global government. But this degree of integration is impos-
sible and undesirable, he maintains: nations have dif-
ferent preferences about the types of institutions and regulations they want, as his life’s work has shown (sic). And they should be entitled to those preferences, he insists—in order to make democratically accountable decisions within their borders. [...] His preference is to abandon hyroglobalization. “I do think there is something special about the nation-state,” he says. “It creates reciprocal obligations that don’t exist across national borders.” (Bolotnikova 2019)

Today, the “race to the bottom” seems to be reversing, with the Washington Consensus being abandoned, and reg-
ulatory bodies, industry groups, and multinational corpora-
tions all vying to set global standards for health, ecology, pri-
vacy, and much more (The Economist 2021b). Due to the costs of adhering to different regimes, multinational compa-
nies will still lobby for less regulation or at least harmonized regulation, but, to reduce costs, they will also often follow the strictest regulations, partly explaining the new regulatory “race to the top” (see Bradford 2020).

Rodrik’s work confirms the degreemia and asymmetry caveats outlined above. Unlike some trilemma devotees, Ro-
drik puts degreemia and power asymmetries at the heart of his analysis. Accepting the existence of halfway measures and incomplete goals, Rodrik’s “iron law” is far less con-
straining than what the term “trilemma” might connot. In fact, according to Rodrik, policymakers are quite adept at “muddling along” and reaching all three goals to a degree. What Rodrik argued, in other words, was not that the three goals are incompatible, but rather that it is impossible to maximize all three goals simultaneously.17

Crucially, Rodrik’s trilemma model also draws attention to other types of disciplining mechanisms, present in the cases just reviewed, but overshadowed by a focus on market “forces” (viz., currency speculation and jurisdiction shopping). As the phrase “political trilemma of the world econ-
omy” indicates, Rodrik’s argument includes what could be called a political disciplining mechanism. In Rodrik’s ac-
count, both deregulation and international/supranational policymaking can lead to political instability and crises. In 2000, for instance, Rodrik argued that efforts to deregulate cross-border flows or to conduct policymaking via supranational institutions led to grievances, protests, strikes, and anti-system votes—much as they did in the early twenti-

Arthur Stein’s “great trilemma” confirms the existence of such politics-based disciplining, bringing insightful refine-
ments to this aspect of Rodrik’s (2016) argument. Stein, a political scientist at the University of California, Los Ange-
les, argued that globalization, democracy, and sovereignty are not simultaneously compatible. Stein’s (2016, 327) pre-
sentation was both degreemia (arguing that the three goals cannot be achieved “in their full-blown form”) and asym-
metric (affirming that the trilemma does not apply equally to all states). Stein’s account of the great trilemma was also diachronic, historical, but not teleological. Stein presented both globalization and democratization as reversible pro-
cesses.19

In 2001, Stein already argued that as economic integra-
tion and democratization increase, governments will not be able to make policy autonomously. However, rather than predicting a sort of EU-style world governance, as Rodrik once had, Stein foresaw, in some states at least, a popular reaction against economic integration and a subsequent de-
crease in globalization (i.e., the nonmaximization of one of the three policy goals). In other words, Stein accurately pre-
dicted that in states where the median voter benefited the least from free trade, a “democratic turn”20 against openness would ensue, resulting in calls for more autonomous policy-
making, especially regarding the regulation of cross-border flows (Stein 2016, 310–28). In this account, perceived eco-


15In a short paragraph, Funke and Zhong (2020) make a much more com-
pelling application of Rodrik’s trilemma to Brexit.

16In financial markets, for example, this can be seen with the advent of envi-
ronmental, social, and governance (ESG) criteria.

17Mathematically, three-dimensional tradeoffs can be modeled as a “surface.” To describe this, writers sometimes use the metaphor of “pulling a blanket” in different directions.

18Interestingly, riots and lobbying are what led to the repeal of the corn laws (i.e., trade tariffs) in 1845–1846 (Boudreaux and Irwin 2021).

19With the term “democracy,” Stein refers to the observance of the will of the majority of one state’s population. Note the difference from Rodrik’s formulation, where democracy can occur in supranational forms of governance.

20Democracy is, in this case, to be distinguished from neoliberalism.

21Economists Michael Bordo and James Harold (2015) concur. Via their re-
view of economic trilemmas, they argue that the simultaneous pursuit of democ-


22Many thanks to the reviewers for underlining the differences between the different types of mechanisms.
According to Dolvik and Visser (2009), EU policymakers face a labor policy trilemma where (i) the free movement of services and labor (openness), (ii) nondiscrimination and equal treatment (the effective regulation of all workers), and (iii) national rights of associations and industrial action (policymaking autonomy) cannot be attained simultaneously. According to these authors, seeking to maintain these three legal principles is juridically impossible (Dolvik and Visser 2009, 504). Just as increases in capital flows can cause central banks to abandon currency pegs or autonomous monetary policymaking, an increase in foreign labor can lead to (calls for) the abandonment of either (i) the nondiscrimination principle, (ii) national labor rights, or (iii) the free movement of services and labor. It is crucial to note that in this supposedly legal case, market-based disciplining mechanisms are also “at work.” Arguably, the core issue here is “regime shopping” (Dolvik and Visser 2009, 521), akin to the arbitrage seen in relation to monetary policy, the jurisdiction shopping seen with financial policy, and the offshoring and outsourcing seen with trade policy. Openness leads to a tension between responding to domestic demands for improved working conditions and multinational corporations taking advantage of differences in national legislation and markets (i.e., obtaining cheaper labor by employing migrants or outsourcing production). The logical reaction to this “social dumping” is to change the legislation, which leads either to “a race to the bottom” (i.e., the golden straightjacket) or “a race to the top” (i.e., supranational governance).23

IR scholars who seek to apply the trilemma framework beyond economics should also consider a new, third type of disciplining mechanism that affected this case. In Dolvik and Visser’s transposition of the trilemma, one disciplining mechanism was lax-based: judges disciplined policymakers. The study, in other words, highlighted the power of the national or supranational judiciary, especially in states with functioning checks and balances. Arguably, the EU is a special case, with a suite of organizations, laws, and customs more conducive to supranational legal harmonization than can be found in other IOs.24 By constantly favoring openness and regulatory effectiveness over policymaking autonomy, the EU member states are increasingly giving the EU state-like features (e.g., redistributing wealth across regions, pooling debt, jointly producing and procuring defense equipment, and arming EU border guards). Elsewhere, governments also seem to be moving away from the neoliberal “deregulatory” model, sometimes toward regulatory harmonization and supranational governance à la EU, sometimes toward deglobalization and autarchy. Just as one can find instances of increased capital controls, tariffs and state aid, and a reduction in work visas, one can also find instances of shared minimum standards and competition for capital, goods, and labor. In the latter context, going above and beyond the minimum standards, having the most stringent ESG standards can be a competitive advantage, attracting all sorts of investment and workers.

Types of Trilemma Policy Goals and Disciplining Mechanisms

The next section will explore the conceptualization of the three policy goals in more detail. Hopefully, this contribution will help future empirical research to describe various state policies and goal realization in detail while also addressing the normative nature of all policy goals. From the review provided above, a generic IR trilemma can be inferred. In each policy sector, the three goals pursued and the disciplining mechanisms that make their simultaneous maximization impossible (for weaker states, at least) share similar characteristics. Following the common practice of representing trilemmas and compatible policy combinations in a triangular model (e.g., Bordo and James 2015; The Economist 2016), figure 1 depicts these characteristics, where:

1. The pursuit of maximum openness and policymaking autonomy will require a degree of lax border controls and regulatory ineffectiveness.27 To simplify, we can characterize this situation as that of deregulation.

2. The pursuit of absolute regulatory effectiveness and policymaking autonomy will require some border controls (i.e., friction) to make technical checks and stop the entry of harmful entities, or even entirely “closing” borders (if and when possible). To simplify, we can characterize this situation, at the extreme end of the spectrum, as autarchy.

3. The pursuit of maximum openness and regulatory effectiveness of cross-border flows will require a degree of partially nonautonomous policymaking, be it in the form of institutionalized supranational decision-making, explicit informal agreements, or even the unilateral application of third-party decisions. No matter the decision-making procedure, the degree of subordination can vary (e.g., union, federalization, treaties, directives, regulations, memorandum of understanding, benchmarking, best practices, and voluntary emulation). This scenario can be problematic for the weaker parties in any such process. To simplify, we can label this situation as that of “interference,” and the extreme end of the spectrum as subordination.28

Of course, what constitutes relative “weakness” will depend on power dynamics specific to time, place, and sector. Further above, it was argued that Keohane and Nye’s concept asymmetric dependence seems particularly relevant, as it explicitly addresses flows (e.g., money). Investigations into the role of ideology, soft power, and isomorphism would certainly be germane to such situations. In some cases, one might find that smaller and apparently weaker states enjoy, in

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22The third option would be to reduce worker mobility, as seen in the somewhat extreme case of Brexit.

23A politics-based mechanism is also possible. In 2008, Dolvik and Visser noted that the favoring of cross-border labor and services was creating resentment against foreign workers, xenophobia, and increased euro scepticism.

24Eventually, EU policymakers revised the legislation. In fact, in the case of “posted workers” directives and regulations, they did so twice, once in 2014 and once in 2018 (European Commission 2020). While the “Enforcement Directive” sought to reduce fraud and introduced inspections, monitoring, and joint liability, the amending directive of 2018 guaranteed posted workers a more equal treatment in terms of pay, allowances, and accommodation (European Commission 2020).

25Journalist Sandbu (2023) talks about an investment/national debt/EU debt trilemma.

26In some sectors, it is possible, of course, to adopt a policy of “mutual recognition” of different states’ standards, possibly based on a regular review process. This can be observed for educational degrees, professional permits, mutual legal assistance, etc., but for some industries mutually identical standards are necessary (e.g., ICT, electronics, and armament). In many instances, the substitution of harmonization for mutual recognition is an avowal of an inability to find common standards.

27In French, interference and intervention are referred to as intercession, hinting at the “managerial” dimension of the intrusion. Depending on the context, subjugation, hegemony, colonialism, annexation, integration, or even federation might be more precise terms.
Figure 1. A generic international relations trilemma

fact, significant influence. This is likely to be the case not only in highly institutionalized settings, such as the EU, but also in antagonistic settings, where smaller actors can act as “kingmakers” (Keohane 1971; Arter 2000; Björkdahl 2008; Jakobsen 2009; Mainwaring 2014; Long 2017b). Clearly, such questions are at the core of debates in IR theory, especially regarding international regimes and organizations (such as the EU, for example).

Types of Goals in IR Trilemmas

With these basic dichotomies in mind (i.e., openness/autarchy, autonomy/interference, and regulation/deregulation), a more nuanced (but still generic) conceptualization of the three policy goals can be developed. First, though, scholars should note the ontological, epistemological, and ethical foundations of any type of trilemma-based research, especially regarding value tradeoffs and the asymmetric distribution of benefits.

Regarding the nature of policy goals, scholars seeking to apply the trilemma framework beyond economics should note that all policy objectives are triply subjective: They are fallible, foundationless, and political (see Sayer 2000). More precisely, they are based on fallible knowledge, foundationless values, and political interests. Keeping this subjectivity in mind will help scholars apply the trilemma to a variety of cases without running the risk of “concept stretching,” for the values of openness, regulation, and autonomy are particular to specific contexts, groups, and judgments. On this topic, appropriate research questions include:

- Who benefits and who suffers from openness, and to what degrees?
- When does regulation actually reduce risks, and for whom? When should expertise and technocracy be preferred over self-governance? What is the most efficient form of governance?
- Is democracy always preferable to other forms of government? Is autonomy the best way to guarantee democracy, and for which demos? Should mass politics and ontological security be pursued at all costs?

In Weberian terms, we could say that trilemma tradeoffs pit different “value spheres” against each other, namely, those of economics, science, and politics, where value judgments pertain to incommensurable qualities such as cost, validity, and identity (Weber 2004). The questions listed above require theoretical, empirical, and even ethical investigations. Fortunately, much work has already been done on such asymmetric distributions and value tradeoffs in IR (e.g., Strange 1998; Beck 2005; OECD 2019).

To advance this interdisciplinary line of research, this section presents types of openness, cross-border flow regulation, and policymaking autonomy. After this, the article will describe types of disciplining mechanisms that can force policymakers to make tradeoffs. The third section then explores how these two typologies can inform future research on different regions and regimes and in different fields of study, such as security and defense.

Types of Openness

By definition, openness means that certain types of entities (e.g., currencies, vaccines, electricity, plumbers, personal data, and even chilled sausages29) can be moved from one polity to another, often crossing the spatial markers of borders and jurisdictions. Today, polities are often defined by their ability to (decide how to) control entities moving from one place to another.30 With these definitions in hand, we already have the outline of potential trilemma tradeoffs. What ought to move freely or be subject to regulations and inspections? What ought to be the territorial boundaries of hindrance-free movement and regulatory sovereignty? Who decides which area is optimal, based on which criteria and which authority? Diverse interests, values, and goals mean that forming a consensus on what ought to be regulated, by whom, when, where, and how is not easy—often, it is simply coercion that “makes right.” These difficulties are visible in European efforts to create currency unions, banking unions, customs areas, and various markets, including financial markets, energy markets, data markets, carbon markets, etc. The same applies to questions regarding the movement of people, including laborers, tourists, and even public offi-

29In the Spring of 2021, the United Kingdom and the EU argued over the importation of chilled (versus frozen) meat products into Northern Ireland and the EU’s single market (because the UK no longer needed to adhere to the EU’s veterinary standards) (Fleming, Pickard, and Foster 2021).

30This is a modern predicament. Pre-modern sovereigns and subjects had lower expectations.
cials such as diplomats, military troops, police officers, and border guards.31

The subjective nature of openness/friction, regulatory (in)effectiveness, and policymaking autonomy/subordination (and the poor conceptualization thereof) has led to invalid measurements. The many publicly available openness indicators and databases, for example, demonstrate that measuring the flow of currency, people, goods, and data is possible, but also challenging (see Manyika et al. 2014; Aizenman and Ito 2020; Funke and Zhong 2020).

Openness measurements might not be comparable or reliable because statistical agencies simply use different standards and protocols.32 Currently, the main issue with openness measurements is the distinction between law and practice, and between licit and illicit movements. We can note, for example, that while a state might be formally open, everyday movements might undergo a great deal of “friction” due to all sorts of nontariff barriers (e.g., paperwork, language barriers, cultural and normative differences, prejudice, etc.). Reverse, while a state might formally forbid a certain type of foreign exchange or seek control over a certain trade, it can also be incapable of controlling said exchanges, notably at its borders, as witnessed with so-called weak and failed states. As noted above, regulation and criminalization often create economic incentives for smuggling, trafficking, and black and gray markets. This might be one policy area in which the trilemma framework can be used, both to analyze empirical cases and to develop policy-specific trilemma models. Security scholars studying transnational organized crime and law enforcement cooperation might use the trilemma framework, with all its subtleties (deterrence, asymmetry, the waxing and waning of globalization, regulation, and democratization) to formalize their findings, compare and contrast with the regulation of licit flows, and, most importantly, ascertain the relevance of the disciplining mechanisms for the regulation of illicit cross-border flows. These points are further explored in the third section.

Types of Effective Regulation

According to historians and social scientists, the general trend, even in premodern times and during the neoliberal era, has been the prevalence of “social contracts,” where policymakers gain legitimacy through the mitigation (to the greatest extent possible) of perceived threats to valued things, so-called “output-based” legitimation (see Rousseau 1983; Beck 1992; Tilly 1992; Luhmann 1993; Beck 1999). But as both the number of valued things and the expectations placed on policymakers increase, the study of such legitimation processes becomes complicated. The conceptualization and operationalization of “effective governance,” in other words, will largely depend on the type of sector-specific risks policymakers are trying to mitigate (e.g., currency devaluation, bankruptcies, unemployment, pandemics, animal and environmental welfare, data theft, pollution, smuggling and trafficking, non-state terrorism, etc.). Moreover, as mentioned above, the definition of “effective regulation” is always subjective and often politicized, i.e., it is more than a technical question. Risks are regularly exaggerated and instrumentalized (e.g., transnational terrorism), and scientists and other experts often disagree on the extent of a risk or threat (e.g., viruses, climate change, biodiversity loss, and nuclear proliferation). But even if there is both expert and political consensus regarding the fundamental facts, different polities and different social classes will disagree over how to proceed and how to share costs and profits. As Ulrich Beck and other risk-focused scholars have noted, one’s stance on these issues will often depend on one’s wealth, status, and power. As studies of “ontological security” have demonstrated, seeking “effective governance” can lead to disagreements not only about relative gains (between states and classes) but also about the very purpose and existence of states and their imagined communities (i.e., demoi). Are the material gains obtained through policy harmonization worth the loss of policymaking autonomy? Are effectiveness, efficiency, and expediency more important than national and popular sovereignty?

Types of Autonomous Policymaking

Often the very act of abandoning autonomous policymaking (in favor of openness and regulatory effectiveness) entails legal commitments or even (con)federation (e.g., Keohane 2002; Olearnik 2015). The pursuit of effective cross-border flow regulation might also require operational cooperation or integration.33 Often, policymakers design IOs to focus on a single function (e.g., civil aviation or policing). Sometimes, policymakers find it more convenient to create IOs whose remit covers several sectors and movement types (such as the EU). To address these variations, one can distinguish between the “breath” of integration (how many members), the “depth” (the degree of integration), and the “scope” (the number of policy sectors) (Schimmelfennig, Leuffen, and Ritterburger 2015).34

A contradictory concept is, of course, that of subsidiarity, i.e., that some issues might be better addressed at a “lower” level of governance. Policymaking autonomy can be delegated (i.e., devolved, decentralized) to sub-state governments without outright federation, separatism, or disintegration being necessary. In this sense, trilemma trade-offs are inescapable—once created, sub-and supra-polities face their own policy trilemmas, and so, to analyze trilemma trade-offs in IR properly, we ought to treat non-state polities (e.g., the EU, Greenland) as other participants in “trilemmic” relations. For scholars seeking to apply the trilemma framework beyond economics, this means the trilemma framework might be relevant to the study of (de)centralization, federalism, separatism, and possibly civil wars. Studies examining the “abolition” of slavery and the criminalization of forced labor and human trafficking, for instance, would also benefit from the application of the trilemma framework and related disciplining mechanisms. Such a trilemma-based study would be truly international in scope and interdisciplinary in method, accounting for the global history of slavery, the creation of international labor markets, and the gradual global and regional harmonization of labor-related customs and laws.

31 Of course, larger, resource-rich states (e.g., the United States and China) might also attempt to reduce transnational risks and threats unilaterally.

32 After World War I, David Mitray suggested governments should adopt a functionalist approach to global politics, where openness-induced cross-border problems are dealt with functional organizations (as opposed to political organizations, as seen with federalism). Today, this liberal institutionalist approach is not reflected in a constant reshuffling of state borders, but in the increasing number of state and interstate agencies (so-called “agencyfication”).
Due to issues regarding its conceptualization and operationalization, providing valid measurements of policymaking autonomy has proved difficult. Joshua Aizenman and Hiro Ito attempted to do this in relation to both the monetary policy trilemma and Rodrik’s political-economy trilemma (Aizenman 2013; Aizenman and Ito 2020). Unfortunately, in the latter study, Aizenman and Ito’s democracy and sovereignty indicators have little relation to Rodrik’s definitions, where the will of the people can be expressed in a supranational setting and states can be autonomous, all while ignoring popular opinion (viz., technocracy). A similar critique can be applied to Funke and Zhong (2020) and their attempt to test Rodrik’s trilemma. The authors define democracy as liberal democracy, leading them to the questionable conclusion that a reduction in “individual liberty” and in “judicial and legislative constraints on the executive” necessarily entails a less democratic form of politics. In many cases, both today and after World War I, citizens have demanded less, not more, social and economic liberalism—the Frankfurt School scholar Eric Fromm (1942) called this an understandable “escape from freedom.” Put differently, with a purely technocratic government, it would be perfectly possible to have great personal liberty, many checks on executive power, and yet little democratic “in-put” (see Mouffe 1997). In fact, Frieden’s golden straightjacket, as critiqued by Rodrik, entailed such a state of affairs.

Beyond poor conceptualization and invalid indicators, as with the concept of openness, the difference between legal reality and practical reality is also difficult to apprehend. A de facto state, for example, might not be formally sovereign and yet enjoy a great deal of autonomous policymaking. Reversely, a state might be formally sovereign and yet, de facto, be under the influence of another state. This can happen willingly when, for instance, stringent standards are adopted for profit or expediency, as seen with California and the EU, for example.35 While states and companies might not be legally obliged to adopt foreign norms, the adoption of a high percentage of these leads to similar results.36 And then there are, of course, all of the possibilities between the two extremes, where policymaking autonomy is divided, delegated, or pooled (Cooley and Spruyt 2009; Lake 2009). To cover all cases, scholars must try to capture both legal reality and practical reality when they select sector-specific policymaking autonomy indicators.

Of course, the fundamental problem (from a policymaker’s perspective) is that cooperation (be it bilateral, multilateral, or “domestic”) to control the movement of entities across borders entails a degree of autonomy loss, both de jure and de facto, especially for the smaller and generally weaker parties concerned (see Frieden 1991, 448). In the United States, for example, the legalization of slavery in “new states” proved divisive to the extreme.

Today, the loss of policymaking autonomy takes many forms, including interference in policymaking and material dependency on others for operational actions. Beyond currency pegs, banking provisions, work permits, sanitary standards, and data protection, we can think of all the measures taken to regulate transnational crime, often in contradiction with traditional definitions of sovereignty and statehood (e.g., legal harmonization, data and evidence sharing, arrest warrant recognition, and joint investigations).37 Taking inspiration from political philosophy (Eric Fromm, Isaiah Berlin, Hannah Arendt, etc.), we can say that policymaking autonomy requires both (i) freedom from foreign interference and (ii) the ability (capabilities and capacity) to decide and act independently (Lewis 2023, 238).

As seen in the first section, the asymmetric nature of most IR means that not all political entities will face the same degree of autonomy loss (see Lake 2009; Long 2017a). Having decided in favor of openness, large and wealthy polities (e.g., large states, customs unions) are often able to combine a preferred degree of regulation and quasi-autonomous policymaking, often by imposing regulatory standards on weaker, more dependent polities. Between entities of similar standing (e.g., the United States/EU/China), now often called “peer competitors,” the power dynamics will be more complicated and uncertain, making for particularly interesting trilemma-based case studies. The real trilemma-based question today, in other words, is who sets the rules.38

Of course, one might be a norm-giver in one sector and a norm-taker in another. Although smaller states do occasionally succeed in promoting their preferences (Keohane 1971; Artner 2000; Björkdahl 2008; Jakobsen 2009; Mainwaring 2014; Long 2017b), no matter the form of world order, the leaders of smaller states must often choose between competing regulatory regimes (see Krasner 1981). Given that the economies of smaller states generally profit from openness, they must abandon all hope for autonomous standard setting (Katzenstein 1985). Considering the considerable current interest in the “return of geopolitics” and “the new Cold War,” the trilemma framework might be fruitfully applied to smaller states and their attempts to not “align” with China or the United States, especially regarding regulatory frameworks, and the way they even use the rivalry to their benefit (playing “kingmaker,” as it were). Still, for these small states, if flows remain relatively open and effective regulation is sought, a degree of policymaking autonomy is bound to be lost. For small-state scholars, then, the question is whose regulations will be adopted, to what degree the regulations actually have to be implemented, and whether such de jure and de facto regulation will require the reduction of flows from competing regulatory regimes (as seen with third-party goods entering customs unions).39 Does nonalignment require a degree of autarchy, and if so, what would the economic costs be? If third options are available, would policymaking then be subordinated to cooperation with other nonaligned states?

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35 In the EU’s case, Ann Bradford (2009), a legal scholar at Columbia University, has called the EU’s decades-long ability to impose its competition, cars, chemicals, data, health, and environmental standards on others, often via market incentives, “the Brussels Effect.” The lesson here is that, no matter the sector, governmental policymaking autonomy might at times be distinct from private sector decision-making autonomy, especially when governmental standards are few or lax. Consequently, both the incorporation of EU directives and regulations by non-EU states and the adoption of EU standards by private corporations could be two ways of measuring two related types of de facto autonomy loss (Yong et al. 2018).

36 Minus a voice and a vote in the EU’s decision-making procedures, of course.

37 The security and defense dimension of the policy trilemma debate is yet to be examined (regarding terrorism, organized crime, economic espionage, and so-called strategic industries, for example). This dimension is covered in more detail in the third section.

38 As the Financial Times journalist Martin Sandbu put it: “Post-Trump, the fight will shift from where production is located to how it is carried out. Welcome to the new trade policy: trade promotion, but in the service of extending the regulatory reach of the three blocs who set the rules—the US, the EU and China” (2020).

39 Arguably, these were the types of trade-offs that the government of Ukraine faced in 2014.
Types of Disciplining Mechanisms in IR Trilemmas

Having explored the subjective nature of policy goals and types of openness, regulation, and autonomous policymaking, it is now possible to summarize the processes that make certain policy combinations virtually impossible for certain polities. As mentioned above, at least three types of disciplinary processes can be distinguished: market-based disciplining, politics-based disciplining, and law-based disciplining. The latter two disciplinary processes are more likely to occur in liberal democracies via free and fair elections and an effective separation of the branches of government, but one can, nevertheless, think of cases where stakeholders have persuaded more authoritarian governments to change course.40

Market-Based Disciplining

As seen with the Mundell–Fleming trilemma, market-based disciplining is the most obvious and the most predictable mechanism. For decades, economists have studied instances where economic costs rise to the point where policymakers decide to reverse course and abandon one of three goals. The first section covered the phenomenon of currency speculation, where economic costs are measurable (e.g., capital reserves, unemployment). With bank failures and financial market failures, the costs are also measurable. With trade and labor, ineffective regulation can lead to deindustrialization, unemployment, and exploitation.

In all four instances, the market-based disciplining mechanism starts as a sector-specific arbitrage process (e.g., jurisdictional shopping, goods dumping, social dumping), where the effects of ineffectively regulated cross-border flows “test” policymakers’ resolve to maintain openness and avoid harmonized regulations (e.g., pegs, banking standards, health and safety standards, minimum wages, criminal law, etc.). Arguably, market-based disciplining mechanisms are similar to economic sanctions, where the hope is that economic costs will be psychologically painful to the point of changing policymaking behavior:

The threat to stability may arise from policies deliberately engineered speculative attacks, from sanctions, but purely economic policy, changes in monetary policy stance, might also have an analogous effect. It is plausible to argue that changes in a central economy drive a global financial cycle. (Bordo and James 2022, 7)41

Costs, moreover, should not just be conceived literally. The “price” of not maximizing one of the policy goals can take many forms. Deregulated cross-border flows can create health costs, environmental costs, social costs, and even security costs. Autarchy might involve economic costs, but it could also incur social and intellectual costs. Policymaking subordination might lead to mental distress (a type of ontological insecurity).

According to David A. Zalewski (2020), macroeconomists often assume a “benevolent social planner” who immediately identifies negative shocks and revises policies to maximize the utility of a representative individual. Critics of this approach argue that instantaneous reactions are unrealistic because they ignore the politics of weighing alternative policies and choosing from among them.

Costs, no matter their nature, do not occur in a vacuum. No matter the regime type, the consequences of policymaking will affect stakeholders, many of whom are likely to call, in one way or another, for reform (or, openness permitting, seek better prospects elsewhere). Put differently, market-based disciplining mechanisms will often be accompanied by more political types of disciplining.

Politics-Based Disciplining

Politics-based disciplining mechanisms center around the petitioning of policymakers through lobbying, mass mobilization, and the like. Nonetheless, politics-based disciplining is often a reaction to (if not an epiphenomenon of) market-based mechanisms (viz., protests against exchange rate instability, inflation, bank bailouts, free trade, deindustrialization, social dumping). In EU studies, differentiated integration scholars identify instances of policy political that move policymakers to opt-out of international treaties and regulation harmonization and, in the extreme, EU membership (Hooghe and Marks 2009; De Wilde 2011, 571; Leruth, Gänzle, and Trondal 2019).42 Of course, politicalization is context-dependent: During different periods, in different regions, and in different regimes, some topics are more amenable to politicization than others.

According to the “Overton Window,” the acceptability of a policy changes over time (Bobric 2021). Leaders, the media, and even foreign foes can try to shape this acceptability (i.e., “help” manufacture consent, “create” a “false consciousness”), via various types of subversion, for example (propaganda, false-flag operations, etc.). Zalewski argues that domestic elites in democracies can use polarization to their advantage (thus protecting their “vested interests”):

Because […] institutionalists view human behavior as socially determined rather than motivated by inborn hedonistic impulses, these elites may exploit the uncertainty that often arises in societies experiencing fundamental transformations through the use of propaganda and other forms of persuasion to reinforce or perhaps even establish nostalgic myths. In the case of macroeconomic policy, these efforts can weaken and delay stabilization programs at the expense of overall social welfare. (2020)

Still, preferences for one policy goal over another should not be reduced to third-party manipulation. As mentioned above, there are subjective, yet rational reasons for preferring policymaking autonomy over openness, and vice versa. And of course, within a policy, preferences are virtually never homogenous. Trilemma-based studies will, therefore, need to take context-specific norms, values, and interests into account, especially those related to local “social contracts.”

Law-Based Disciplining

Politics-based mechanisms can be based on mere lobbying and mobilization, of course. In states with a reliable legal system (rule of law), stakeholder engagement is often based

40In China, for example, the government often takes public opinion into account, especially regarding economic questions (The Economist 2021a). As mentioned below, this is an area for future trilemma-based research.

41Sanctions can reduce access not only to capital but also to “strategic” goods and skills that are not available domestically. Of course, they are also performative, sending “signals” to various audiences.

42Some differentiated integration scholars focus less on catalysts, votes, and vetoes, and more on the nature of the vectors in question. For example, in his doctoral thesis, Alkun Kölükker (2006) used public goods theory to explain differentiated integration.
on a legal right or principal, sometimes defended through national and international courts. In such instances, the decisions of judges can discipline executive-branch policymakers. Legislators are, in many states, also part of the policymaking process and can, in this role, also coerce executive branch policymakers. Both types of interbranch disciplining were observed in the first section in relation to labor migration. Clearly, judicial and legislative disciplining can occur in relation to all three types of policy goals (i.e., openness, effective regulation, and policymaking autonomy).

The role of lawmakers and judges in policymaking is more indeterminate than arbitrage-related market-based mechanisms, but focusing on this aspect of the policymaking process is nonetheless useful. First, it raises the all-important question of how policy is made and who the final decision-makers are. It would be interesting, for example, to see the degree to which disciplining mechanisms function differently in less democratic regimes, which often also have three branches of government. Second, laws and rights are often fundamental to certain types of trilemmas in IR. This is because, as mentioned above, the best level for policymaking authority (local, national, supranational) is often contested (e.g., the “subsidarity” principle in EU law). Put differently, because disputes over jurisdiction and competence to regulate flows are a regular occurrence, legal aspects cannot be ignored.

**Trilemma Tradeoffs and Future IR Research**

This paper has argued that some IR questions can be conceived of as trilemmas and that frameworks found in macroeconomics can be adapted to help answer these IR questions. As seen above, a few macroeconomists have transposed the Mundell–Fleming trilemma to other economic policy sectors, including finance, labor, and trade. To facilitate future research on IR policy trilemmas, this paper presented a generic trilemma of IR, and a typology of goals and disciplining mechanisms. The hope here was to avoid what Sartori called concept stretching. The last section builds on the above to suggest how scholars might apply the trilemma framework to different regions and regimes, and how they might identify new, sector-specific trilemmas beyond economics.

**Trilemma Tradeoffs in Law Enforcement**

If the trilemma framework is applicable to the legal and licit flow of capital, goods, services, and people, the illegal and illicit versions of such flows will also be amenable to trilemma-based studies. International law enforcement, therefore, can be examined through the trilemma framework. For example, considering that most trilemma-based studies focus on capital mobility, the trilemma framework could reasonably be used to study the “dark side” of capital flows, such as money laundering, terrorism financing, and sanctions evasion. It could also be used to study other types of flows, such as smuggling and trafficking.

To historicize law enforcement trilemma tradeoffs properly, one might have to examine the creation of modern policing and border control, the international politics of criminalization, and the advent of international cooperation in various types of law enforcement (customs, immigration, policing, criminal justice, etc.). In many cases, the search for effective regulation and policymaking autonomy are relatively recent ambitions, typical of late modernity—consider, for example, international passport standards. Reviewing the professionalization of law enforcement, the creation of what Didier Bigo calls “transnational guilds,” and the accompanying exchange of intelligence and evidence, would demonstrate how various states, big and small, rich and poor, powerful and weak, have balanced tradeoffs between openness, law enforcement, and policymaking autonomy. Such research would also ascertain the degree to which international law enforcement standards are the result of power asymmetries, as opposed to purely technical or scientific requirements or universal values, norms, and interests. Trilemma-based law enforcement research, in sum, would problematize international cooperation even if, in many cases, such cooperation has already been politicized by actors “on site.”

Those familiar with globalization studies will recall that the free movement of goods, capital, services, and people was often used to justify the loss of state autonomy in areas as varied as money laundering, terrorism financing, or even asylum and visa policy (Bigo and Guild 2005; Odorige 2018). Even before the US government’s Global War on Terror (GWOT), law enforcement officials drew attention to the perceived need to emulate the “mobile and international nature of criminals” (Lewis 2023, 126–56). They also defended the notion that no state could address security threats on its own. Indeed, a consequence of so-called globalization was the need to globalize law enforcement cooperation, often based on Western, if not US, standards and interests. One argument was that differences between jurisdictions create both smuggling and trafficking opportunities and so-called “safe havens” (for a refutation, see Bigo 1996). In essence, politicians and practitioners were employing a trilemma-type argument: Openness was said to enable transnational threats (smuggling and trafficking, terrorism, tax and sanction evasion, etc.) and related arbitrage opportunities (e.g., safe havens, jurisdiction “shopping,” etc.). Via various disciplining mechanisms, policymakers were obliged to either tolerate transnational crime, reduce transnational flows, or increase law enforcement cooperation (e.g., mutual recognition and legal harmonization, attachés and liaisons, IOs and agencies, and international professional education and training) (Lewis 2023, 126–56). The trilemma framework, therefore, could add a degree of systematicity to any research that focuses on transnational organized crime or international law enforcement cooperation. The framework could be used to examine varieties of openness, develop the conceptualization of regulatory effectiveness, and measure autonomy loss, especially for weaker states at the losing end of asymmetric dependencies.

**Trilemma Tradeoffs in Defense Procurement**

Arguably, countering organized crime, terrorism, and related sanctions evasion is not the only concern of security scholars today. The China–US rivalry and advent of bipolar multipolarity are also staples of contemporary security studies. Monetary policy, finance, trade, and labor are increasingly used as tools of grand strategy and especially of 43With the return of multipolar competition and bellicosity, within-block security cooperation is likely to increase, not decrease. This is a security-autonomy dilemma for policymakers, especially in small states.
44Some autonomy losses became publicly apparent and politicized during the GWOT, especially when the US government demanded increased access to other states’ data en masse (Bigo and Tsoukala 2008).
economic competition and conflict (e.g., aid, tariffs, embargoes, expropriation, and sabotage). As the meanings of “regulatory effectiveness” multiply, trilemma tradeoffs will need to be studied from new angles. Policymakers and other stakeholders might politicize openness by securitizing it, portraying it as an enabler of state-based threats, for instance. As this occurs and openness goals are reduced or abandoned, new IR trilemmas are bound to form within new geopolitical “blocs,” i.e., closed groups of supposedly “friendly” states, simply shifting the scale of trilemma tradeoffs.

To understand what such inter bloc tradeoffs would look like, one can examine defense procurement tradeoffs. Readers versed in the political economy of defense will be familiar with common defense procurement goals, such as obtaining state-of-the-art equipment, securing supply, obtaining value for money, job creation, and technological spinoffs. Matthew Uttley notes that these goals are “often in tension with one another, and, in trying to resolve these tensions, governments have to make a set of choices and tradeoffs” (Uttley 2018, 74). The defense procurement literature often portrays these tradeoffs as a dilemma between the benefits of “sovereignty” and the benefits of “integration,” much like debates about Brexit were often framed (on defense procurement and Brexit, see Uttley and Wilkinson 2019). Regarding international cooperation in defense procurement (e.g., for major weapon systems), the options available to governments fall along an on-shore/off-shore continuum; produce domestically in a “self-sufficient” manner (national production), coproduce with allies and partners and licensed production (cooperation), or import from abroad (“off-the-shelf”) (Uttley 2018, 78–80; Droff and Malizard 2023a, 114–6).

Defense procurement tradeoffs can also be considered within three-dimensional models, i.e., as constituting a policymaking trilemma. As typically construed, defense procurement trilemmas share broadly, the same policy goals as those reviewed above (i.e., openness, effectiveness, and autonomy), but the tradeoffs in question are due to slightly different mechanisms: Defense procurement trilemmas are the product of differences in scale (state size), and are not due to (arbitrage-opportunity-creating) differences in regulatory regimes. Consequently, politics-based and law-based disciplining mechanisms will be more relevant than market-based ones. Considering the growing role of governments in markets (viz., industrial policy, protectionism, sanctions, etc.), in some cases to the point of organizing a wartime economy, the study of security-related public procurement trilemmas should prove to be quite topical.

Using Brazil as a case study, Patrice Franko identifies a “defense acquisition trilemma” (2014). According to Franko, policymakers in Brazil face a trilemma where they cannot simultaneously maximize the “globalization of technology production” (openness), “security autonomy” (policymaking autonomy), and “economic stability” (economic regulatory effectiveness). The logic here is that participation in global supply chains (to gain access to state-of-the-art technology and lower unit costs) creates dependencies that compromise autonomous foreign policymaking. Importantly, Franko’s argument is degreest (“pure autonomy is an illusion,” “this is not an all or nothing proposition”) and broadly accepts the existence of asymmetries (“Even in the United States, the largest defense production capability in the world, autonomy is limited by its integration in the global supply chain”) (2014, 3–6).

Indeed, when applying the trilemma framework to defense procurement, degreest and power asymmetry must be kept in mind. The literature on defense supply chain trilemmas suggests that defense industry protectionism in smaller states will increase costs and stifle innovation (supposedly driven by interfirm competition) (see Markowski, Hall, and Wylie 2009). A loss of innovation (a military “edge”) will, in the long run, reduce the military’s ability to deter and compel, putting the very existence of the state at risk. This logic creates an incentive for smaller-state policymakers to (i) open their industrial bases, (ii) open procurement to foreign companies, and (iii) increase exports, with all three options putting defense procurement policymaking autonomy at risk, albeit in different ways (Lewis 2023, 90–95). “Cooperation amounts to giving up some sovereignty, which leaves export—one of France’s preferred solutions, even though this strategy risks leading to external dependence” (Droff and Malizard 2023a, 117).

Such tradeoffs are typical of defense procurement in Europe. Joselin Droff and Julien Malizard (2023a, 2023b), for example, make a trilemma-based argument based on the same logic as Franko’s, but examining European case studies. They argue that policymaking autonomy, low unit costs, and “technological advantages” (spin-offs, skills transfers) cannot be maximized simultaneously, especially in smaller states. Droff and Malizard’s argument, in other words, is also based on the asymmetry caveat: “The US example shows that it is possible to overcome this trilemma if the domestic market is big enough—yet finding a big enough market is at the heart of the European problem” (2023a, 117).

Current events suggest that the trilemma framework would, in fact, apply to an even wider range of public procurements, beyond traditional military equipment. As increasing numbers of services, goods, and supply chains are securitized, the scope of what constitutes “defense procurement” will increase. Uttley argued as much in 2018:

[... ] The increasingly “hybrid” nature of contemporary conflict has been matched with a blurring of the distinction between “defence” and “security” sectors, technologies, notably in the cyber security domain. This suggests the need for research into similarities and differences between states’ procurement approaches across the whole range of defence and security-related technologies. (2018, 83)

As the governments of China and the US compete for an increasing number of technologies (e.g., semiconductors, quantum information technologies, and “artificial intelligence” systems), the trilemma framework will help understand:

- The physical security and policymaking autonomy benefits that reduced openness might entail;
- The tradeoffs that “supply chains between friends” necessitate, especially for smaller, less powerful states.**

Journalist Rana Foroohar recently argued that economic policies of the “Global North” are increasingly being securitized. According to her, “For years, the west thought security and market concerns were separate. But for China, national security and economic security are the same thing. The decoupling story is far from over” (2023). When placed in

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**On the role of economics on political borders and state size, see Alesina and Spolaore (2003) and Spolaore (2022).**

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**For example, smaller states seeking to maximize openness (reduced costs) and procurement effectiveness (state-of-the-art technologies) seem to put policymaking autonomy at risk (security of supply).**
the context of security-related procurement, the trilemma-based implications of trendy terms such as “de-risking,” “friend-shoring,” and “reindustrialization” become evident.

Trilemma Tradeoffs beyond Europe

Trilemma-based research is often Eurocentric. Examining non-European cases and different regime types (autocratic and devolved) would allow for further theory development and refinement. To develop a fully-fledged trilemma-based theory of IR, future research could investigate how different types of market-based, politics-based, and law-based disciplining processes interact in different regions and regime types. The objective here would be to determine the degree to which policymakers face costs when they ignore trilemma tradeoffs. Understanding the degree to which the trilemma framework is applicable to other regions and regimes would then allow for a whole-of-IR trilemma-based theory to be developed, enabling a better understanding of how tradeoffs interact globally. Of course, such a theory would never be exact, but it would help to develop a better understanding of the complex interactions that exist between polities and policy sectors.

Of course, some have already started to apply the trilemma framework to non-European states. This is especially the case in relation to monetary policy and trade policy, where the trilemma framework has been used to study Asian and Latin American states and economies (e.g., Hsing 2012; Akcelik, Cortuk, and Turhan 2014; Bárcena and Porcile 2022). And, as seen above, the trilemma has also been applied to defense procurement in Brazil. To build on this work, the trilemma framework could be used to study changes in IR and international values, norms, and standards. For instance, one might fruitfully use the trilemma framework to investi[gate efforts by non-Western states to “sanction-proof” their economies, reduce dependencies, or simply to adapt to competing demands by growing regulatory powers. Indeed, as the significance of non-Western currencies, goods, markets, networks, and organizations grows, a whole field of trilemma-relevant cases will be worth exploring. No matter the form and function of the regulatory cooperation, power asymmetries will force less powerful states to face openness/regulated autonomy tradeoffs. In some policy sectors, governments might decide to exchange one form of subordination for another. In others, they might favor increased deregulation or increased autarchy. Not only will these tradeoffs affect each other, but also some states are bound to ignore the trilemmas, meaning disciplining mechanisms will likely occur. All of these considerations promise a healthy future for trilemma-based studies in IR.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that trilemma tradeoffs are not only rife in international macroeconomics but possibly also in IR writ large. The first section provided an analytical review of macroeconomic trilemmas and highlighted three features: that goal attainment is a question of degree, that goal attainment varies across time, and that policy constraints affect states asymmetrically. The result of this first section is a comprehensive IR trilemma framework that can facilitate the analysis of other policy sectors, all while avoiding “concept stretching.” The second section presented types of policy goals and possible disciplining mechanisms. The third section suggested possible lines of inquiry for future research and theorization. Arguably, much of the trilemma-based literature is Eurocentric, liberal-democracy-centric, and state-centric. Applying the trilemma framework to other regions, regimes, and levels of analysis might prove fruitful. Currently, the trilemma-based framework is rarely applied to security and defense cooperation. It would arguably be interesting to search for trilemma tradeoffs and accompanying disciplining mechanisms in defense policy and security policy, especially within smaller and poorer states.

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