Weapons Governance by the Weak

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Why do small and medium states pursue multilateral agreements to regulate or ban weapons? This paper develops a theory of why small and medium states pursue multilateral weapons governance and demonstrates it through the case of the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. It proposes that, beyond the technical content of the agreement, small and medium states use these agreements to reduce their vulnerability to great powers and to exercise greater agency and influence in world politics. Such agreements thus threaten great powers' privileged position in world politics. The case study draws on over forty elite interviews conducted with diplomats, international bureaucrats, and members of civil society in Geneva, Switzerland. The findings of this paper indicate that a lack of leadership from the United States and other powerful states on weapons governance can be filled by states seeking to advance divergent goals that challenge the status quo.

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Introduction

On July 7, 2017, 122 states voted at the United Nations to pass the new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). They were cheered on by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, which was soon after awarded the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize for its work to bring the treaty to fruition. Yet all nine nuclear weapon states were conspicuously absent for the treaty negotiations, and the United States, France, and United Kingdom quickly released a statement condemning the treaty (United States, United Kingdom, and France 2017). The states whose weapons were now banned under this new treaty rejected the treaty outright. Why, then, did so many states negotiate (and subsequently celebrate) a treaty banning nuclear weapons when all nuclear weapon states remained adamant that they would not give up their nuclear weapons? More broadly, why do small and medium states pursue multilateral agreements to regulate or ban weapons?

Given the P5's dominance in both the possession of nuclear weapons and in international relations more broadly, it is puzzling why small and medium states would expect to accomplish anything by pursuing a treaty to prohibit nuclear weapons when nuclear weapon states opposed it. Indeed, many analysts in nuclear weapons states and nuclear-allied states dismissed the TPNW as meaningless or even counterproductive (e.g., Harries 2017; Highsmith and Stewart 2018). Yet the majority of states in the world invested considerable time and diplomatic resources to pursue this treaty. Moreover, rather than simply ignoring the treaty, the P5 strongly condemned it and vigorously denied its importance. This was not the first time small and medium states had pursued a multilateral agreement to govern weapons without the support of the great powers. Understanding why and how these states pursued the TPNW offers insight not only into this specific case, but also more broadly why and how small and medium states seek to govern weapons without the support of great powers.

This article develops a theory of why and how small and medium states pursue multilateral weapons governance. It contends that small and medium states pursue these agreements to both limit their vulnerability to great powers and to exercise greater agency and influence in world politics. These efforts challenge great powers' material resources and social standing, and elicit concerted efforts from great powers to prevent such initiatives from gaining support. Multilateral weapons governance by small and medium states is thus no less than an attempt to reshape international relations. Although scholars and policymakers have focused on the implications of US-China competition for the future of international relations, this article highlights how small and medium states actively pursue their own geopolitical goals, and often do not readily fall in line behind one great power or another.

In seeking agreements that advance their goals, small and medium states strategically frame weapons to emphasize their destructive consequences and build coalitions of support among small and medium states. Furthermore, they pursue these agreements through international fora and rules that empower small and medium states and disempower great powers. I demonstrate this theory through the case of the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. This case study draws on over forty elite interviews conducted in Geneva, Switzerland in 2019-2021 with diplomats, international bureaucrats, and members of civil society. The case study finds strong support for the theoretical expectations regarding the motivations for why small and medium states pursue multilateral weapons governance agreements and the process through which they do so.

This article uses the term 'multilateral weapons governance' to refer to agreements (whether legally binding or not) that govern the production, trade, possession, and/or use of weapons ranging from small arms to nuclear weapons.[1] It uses Ruggie's (1992, 567) definition of multilateralism as "coordinat[ing] national policies in groups of three or more states [...] on the basis of certain principles of ordering relations among those states." As this article shows, the 'principles of ordering relations' are central to understanding multilateral weapons governance.

[1]This covers what other scholars often classify as arms control, nonproliferation, or disarmament agreements.

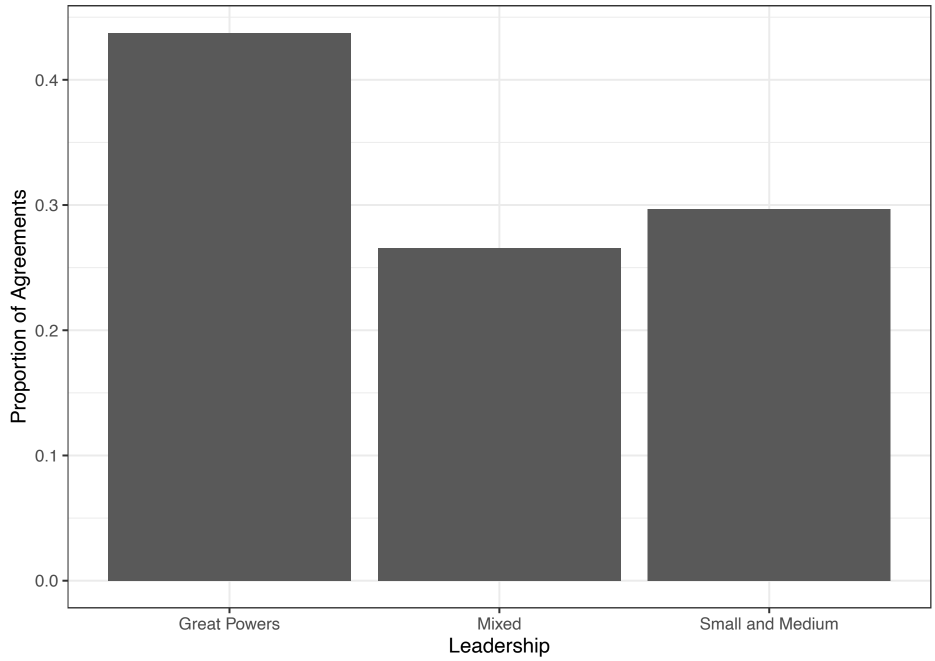
Multilateral Weapons Governance By the Rest

A wide range of scholarship has found that small and medium states craft multilateral agreements to govern a variety of issue areas, including security, human rights, and the environment, even when they lack the support of great powers (e.g., Brem and Stiles eds. 2009; Deitelhoff and Walbott 2012; Panke 2012; Bower 2017; Long 2017; Corbett, Yi-chong, and Weller 2019). Scholarship on multilateral weapons governance, however, tends to focus on initiatives led by the United States and other powerful states, especially when examining multilateral governance of nuclear weapons (e.g., Coe and Vaynman 2015; Bidgood and Potter 2018; Gibbons 2022). Many scholars neglect small and medium states' efforts in this area, and some go so far as to claim that such states' attempts are futile unless they can secure the support of powerful states, particularly the United States (Fey et al. 2013).

Yet studies that focus on US-led agreements fail to offer an explanation for why small and medium states would negotiate agreements that lack the buy-in of the United States or other great powers. Moreover, multilateral weapons governance led by small and medium states is neither new nor rare. As Figure 1 shows, 30 percent of multilateral weapons governance agreements since the end of World War II have been led by small and medium states, and 27 percent have been led by a mix of small/medium states and great powers.[2] Multilateral weapons governance is not a project led solely by great powers.

[2]See Appendix A for a list of all multilateral weapons governance agreements led by small and medium states since the end of World War II. For data, see Egel 2022.

Figure 1: Leadership in Multilateral Weapons Governance



When scholars do examine multilateral weapons governance agreements led by small and medium states, they often treat such agreements in isolation rather than part of a broader phenomenon; assuming that landmines and nuclear weapons are too dissimilar to compare (e.g., Price 1998; Bower 2015; Musto 2018). However, such agreements are often negotiated by the same states and driven by similar concerns. Thus, it is important to examine what broader goals small and medium states seek through these types of agreements, rather than treat them in isolation. Yet understanding the political goals these states seek through multilateral weapons governance is complicated by the fact that proponents of such agreements have often emphasized the humanitarian consequences of weapons they aim to regulate and/or the importance of civil society in the initiative; underappreciating the strategic elements of why and how small and medium states pursue these agreements (e.g., Price 1998; Carpenter 2011; Petrova 2016; Gibbons 2018). Small and medium states are no more inherently altruistic than great powers. Moreover, although small and medium states have worked with civil society partners in multilateral weapons governance, states are ultimately the ones that negotiate, ratify, and implement multilateral agreements (and bear the costs of doing so).

Analyzing the goals that states (and in particular, states that are not great powers) seek through multilateral agreements to govern weapons is thus a critical, but under-explored issue in international relations and security studies. Such agreements govern not only specific weapons, but also geopolitics broadly: they are political agreements that aim to shape state behavior and relations among states. Treating weapons governance as a tool of international relations, rather than as an end in itself, facilitates an assessment of the different political goals that states use multilateral weapons governance to pursue. Understanding why and how states pursue these agreements is also central to understanding who benefits from these agreements, as well as the prospects for concluding future multilateral weapons governance agreements. As a growing literature underscores, global governance and multilateral agreements are often not simply solutions to cooperation challenges, but struggles over power and authority (e.g., Fehl 2014; Bower 2015; Pouliot 2016). Additionally, while some scholars emphasize that adversaries need sufficient mutual interests as a basis for negotiating weapons governance agreements (e.g., Bidgood and Potter 2018), multilateral weapons governance is often negotiated among like-minded states, rather than between adversaries. This indicates that mutual interests among adversaries is not always a necessary condition for multilateral weapons governance. In theorizing and examining multilateral weapons governance led by small and medium states, this article suggests a wider array of paths through which multilateral weapons governance may occur than research focusing on US-led initiatives often concludes.

This article distinguishes between two categories of states in world politics: small and medium states, and great powers. It defines great powers as the five permanent members of the UN Security Council: China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In the post-World War II international system, these states have been granted unparalleled rights and authority, including permanent seats on the Security Council and being recognized as the only legitimate nuclear weapon states under the Treaty on the Non-

Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (the only treaty to recognize certain states' possession of nuclear weapons). Moreover, these states dominate the production of weapons, from the arms trade to nuclear weapons.[3] Their material dominance in weapons production and their social dominance via rights and privileges are intimately linked and set them apart from other states. Although the P5 have had permanent seats on the UN Security Council since 1945 (before four of them had nuclear weapons), scholars generally agree that these states' possession of nuclear weapons is deeply tied to their international authority and great power status (Jervis 1990; O'Neill 2006). Four other states possess nuclear weapons (Israel, India, Pakistan, and North Korea), but none enjoy anywhere near the same level of rights and privileges as the P5.

Small and medium states, meanwhile, encompass all other states in the international system.[4] Although this covers a wide range of states with varying resources and relationships, the key distinction is that these states neither dominate the global production of weapons nor are endowed with the P5's special privileges. This follows other definitions that classify small states based on the asymmetry of their relations with more powerful states (e.g., Keohane 1969, 296; Long 2017, 186). I avoid the terminology of middle powers because

> "the term 'middle power' never has had a clear meaning or definition, and the so-called middle powers have largely been self-electing [...] Scholarly efforts to bring more rigor to the concept have failed to agree on its basic definition and membership list [due to] a fundamental disagreement over whether the 'middle power' is defined by its functional capabilities, characterized by its strong moral imperative as a 'good international citizen,' designated by its position in the international hierarchy, or revealed in its foreign policy behaviors" (Neack 2017).

Moreover, multilateral weapons governance is not led by one particular state or set group of states across different agreements. Excluding certain 'middle powers' such as Canada, Brazil, or India does not change either the theory or the case study in this article.

[3]See SIPRI Yearbooks 1968-2018.

[4]This is conceptually similar to Bower (2017)'s terminology of 'non-great powers'.

Why Small and Medium States Pursue Multilateral Weapons Governance

Small and medium states seek two primary and related goals via multilateral weapons governance: reducing their vulnerability to great powers and increasing their agency and influence in world politics. These goals are not mutually exclusive, but are conceptually distinct. Reducing vulnerability refers to decreasing negative consequences of the relationship between great powers and small/medium states. Increasing agency and influence meanwhile refers to a positive change for small and medium states and an increase in their role in world politics. For example, if great powers limit their arsenals through a bilateral arms control agreement, this might reduce small and medium states' vulnerability, but would not directly increase their agency or influence.

Reducing Vulnerability

First, small and medium states pursue multilateral weapons governance agreements to limit their vulnerability to great powers. Given their relatively limited resources, they are far less able to insulate or protect themselves from the use of destructive weapons than great powers are (Baker Fox 1959). Great powers' dominance in the production, possession, and potential use of weapons of warfare threatens small and medium states' security. Moreover, in the post-World War II period, international conflicts, including proxy wars, have almost always taken place on the territory of small and medium states rather than great powers. Such states are vulnerable both to coercion from great powers and to the unintended effects of great powers' activities involving different weapons. Although some small and medium states mitigate their vulnerability through military alliances (or informal partnerships) with great powers, many others remain outside of alliances with great powers. Regulating weapons through multilateral agreements offers all small and medium states a path through which to reduce their vulnerability to great powers' military dominance. However, their assessment of which weapons leave them vulnerable is not materially determined alone. Rather, it is also based on whether great powers hold these weapons and the ways in which great powers' control over these weapons is implicated in their geopolitical dominance more broadly.

Small and medium states (including those in alliances with great powers) are also socially vulnerable to great powers' authority in international relations: great powers' material, economic, and social dominance facilitates their ability to make rules for weaker states and impose conditions that reinforce or increase asymmetric relations between great powers and the rest (Krisch 2005; Panke 2012, 389). Reducing small and medium states' vulnerability to great powers involves not only reducing their physical vulnerability, but their social vulnerability to great powers' rule-making as well. Although multilateralism can be a tool to establish and maintain great power dominance, it can also be a tool for small and medium states to challenge this dominance and the vulnerability it creates for them.

Small states use multilateral weapons governance to limit their vulnerability vis-à-vis great powers by establishing collective rules to restrict great powers' freedom of action. Creating multilateral rules for regulating weapons provides small and medium states with a particularly important way to reduce their vulnerability to great powers because it is an effort to circumscribe both the military and social elements of great powers' dominance. Although multilateral weapons governance is unlikely to entirely eliminate small and medium states' military or social vulnerability to great powers, it provides them with a tool to both limit great powers' weapons (and their ability to threaten weaker states with those weapons) and their freedom of action to impose asymmetric relations on weaker states.

Small and medium states have long sought to reduce their vulnerability to great powers through multilateral initiatives. In discussing prospects for arms control during the Cold War, Bull (1976, 11) noted the salience of non-aligned small and medium states' material grievances and lack of power combined with their "sense of impotence and vulnerability" in relation to the great powers, emphasizing that bilateral arms control between the superpowers would not address these concerns. These states did not pursue multilateral weapons governance out of altruism, but to advance their own interests, especially reducing their vulnerability.

Agency and Influence

Small and medium states also seek to increase their agency and influence in world politics. Agency and influence are related but distinct concepts. Agency refers to "freedom from subjugation" (Spivak 1996, 294) and the capability to "make a difference to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events" (Giddens 1984, 15), i.e., the ability to chart an independent course of action. It is defined not in opposition to structure, but to subjectivity. Influence refers to a consequentialist form of agency that involves shaping options or outcomes for others: agency involves a potential for influence but does not require its actualization. In seeking both agency and influence, small and medium states attempt to reshape international relations to be less asymmetrically dominated by the concerns and priorities of great powers, and more so by their own concerns and priorities. That is, small and medium states seek to challenge the international hierarchy that affords great powers special rights, including political authority or the right to make rules for others, and claim a greater role for themselves. Great powers' hierarchical authority is not necessarily based on consent, but rather is often imposed on weaker states, denying them agency and influence (Pouliot 2018, 115, 119).

Multilateral weapons governance offers small and medium states an important way through which to increase their agency and influence in world politics. By making international rules regarding the weapons that states possess, trade, and use, multilateral weapons governance addresses a core element of how states seek security and how great powers preserve their authority and dominance. Understanding governance as a system of rule and control elucidates its importance in providing or denying small and medium states agency and influence. Moreover, the *process* of pursuing multilateral weapons governance also provides small and medium states with greater agency, rather than sitting on the sidelines and hoping for great powers to grant them greater agency and influence. By making collective rules about the weapons states can use to defend themselves (and threaten others), small and medium states can reshape international relations to their benefit. Although other scholars have also argued that international institutions and agreements can provide small state with 'voice' opportunities, they consider the consent and participation of great powers to be a necessary condition for this approach (Grieco 1995, 34). In contrast, I contend that multilateral governance can be an important avenue for small and medium states to exert greater agency and voice even when great powers do not cooperate.

For small and medium states, questions of agency and influence are especially salient in weapons governance because military capabilities are a particularly asymmetric element of relations between states (Muller 2013, 6). Thus, multilateral weapons governance offers these states a powerful tool via which to challenge great powers' dominance and create an alternative that instead empowers small and medium states. Moreover, the close relationship between weapons and authority in international relations is not new. As Bull noted, during the Cold War small and medium states viewed the US-Soviet emphasis on bilateral arms control as primarily concerned with stabilizing the balance between great powers and as part of a "system of hegemony which they wish to break down" (Bull 1976, 8). In response, small and medium states in Latin America pursued the 1967 Treaty of Tlatelolco (which created the world's first regional nuclear weapon free zone) not only out of a desire to limit their vulnerability to the destructiveness of US and Soviet nuclear weapons (a concern that was heightened by the Cuban Missile Crisis), but also to preserve their sovereignty and increase their agency relative to the two superpowers (Musto 2018, 162-164). As the case study in this article demonstrates, the same concerns motivated small and medium states to pursue the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons fifty years later.

However, it is costly for small and medium states to pursue multilateral weapons governance—both in terms of political capital to defy great powers and in terms of finances to support negotiating conferences and potentially a secretariat to assist in implement the agreement

(Pouliot 2016). Thus, they pursue these agreements when they anticipate that the benefits of the initiative (reducing their vulnerability to great powers and enabling them to exercise greater agency and influence) will outweigh the expected costs and risks. Such conditions may to arise due to a variety of factors that either elevate their vulnerability and reduce their agency and influence—intensifying the need to mitigate these dynamics. They may also arise from increased expectations that the agreement will be effective in advancing these objectives. Examples of such factors include including heightened use and/or damage caused by the use of a certain weapon in warfare, an advocacy campaign by civil society, a shared perception among small and medium states that the status quo is untenable, and/or salient examples of past success by small and medium states. Small and medium states are acutely highly aware of the asymmetries, hierarchies, and power differentials in world politics (Pouliot 2016; 2019; Long 2017). They do not expect that multilateral weapons governance will eliminate these differences. Instead, the key question for them in deciding whether to pursue a new multilateral agreement or not is whether they expect the agreement will advance norms that reduce their vulnerability to and increase their agency and influence vis-à-vis great powers.

How Small and Medium States Achieve Their Goals

The existence of these motivations does not mean that small and medium states will necessarily succeed in reaching multilateral weapons governance agreements that reflect and advance these goals. Framing the issue, building support, controlling the institutional format, and delineating the content of the agreement are key elements that explain how such states pursue their goals. These elements are mutually reinforcing: framing the issue helps control the format of negotiations and the agreement text. Likewise, building support strengthens the framing and reinforces the content of the agreement. Without control over the negotiating format, it is more difficult for small and medium states to control the agreement text. The reverse is also true: when small and medium states fail to achieve any of these elements, they are less likely to reach agreements that advance their goals.

Framing the Issue

For all states, framing the weapon to be governed is a critical step of translating their goals into an agreement that advances these goals. In international negotiations, frames shape or limit the scope of an issue, and in doing so, legitimize certain solutions while delegitimizing others. They alter the prioritization of different problems (i.e., set the agenda) and shape the options available to opponents of an initiative (Panke 2012, 320). Specifically, small and medium states tend to frame weapons in terms of their destructive effects, including their humanitarian effects. This frame centers small and medium states' vulnerability, legitimizing and prioritizing a response that reduces their vulnerability to these weapons while delegitimizing responses that do not address their vulnerability. For example, in the process leading to the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty (which was also led by small and medium states), Price (1998, 627-630) highlighted the importance of framing landmines in terms of their humanitarian effects by 'grafting' them onto existing norms and embedding this frame in a broader narrative that emphasized vulnerability. Other scholars have found that in multilateral climate change negotiations, small states highlight their vulnerability to greater forces as a key part of their effort to develop new norms that challenge a hierarchical order (Corbett, Yi-chong, and Weller 2019, 654)

This framing also identifies the source of the problem with great powers that produce, export, and/or use these weapons, rather than with small and medium states. It delegitimizes and stigmatizes great powers' production and/or possession of these weapons and their related dominance in world politics. For example, framing weapons in terms of their destructive effects makes irrelevant questions of whether multilateral weapons governance will advance strategic stability. Furthermore, in reframing weapons to focus on their harmful effects, small and medium states attempt to shift the burden of proof to great powers and other states that oppose the initiative, forcing great powers to demonstrate that their production, use, or export of the weapons in question is appropriate.[5] Even when states oppose an agreement, they may accept the framing of the issue, justifying their actions within this frame and inadvertently lending greater legitimacy to the goals behind the agreement.

Particularly in the post-Cold War period, small and medium states have often worked in partnerships with NGOs to frame and build broad support for their initiatives. As other scholars have found, civil society has played an important role in framing landmines and cluster munitions in terms of their destructive effects, as part of multilateral weapons governance in the face of great power opposition (e.g., Price 1998; Petrova 2019; Carpenter 2011). By promoting certain framings of weapons, both with the general public and among elite diplomats, civil society can accelerate small and medium states' efforts in multilateral weapons governance. Yet the contributions of civil society to multilateral weapons governance should not be overstated relative to the contributions of small and medium states, and the existence of civil society partners is not a necessary condition for pursuing multilateral weapons governance agreements that aim to advance these goals. Many examples of multilateral weapons governance led by small and medium states—including the five regional nuclear weapons free zones and the 1979 Moon Agreement (which established the Moon and its natural resources as the common heritage of mankind)—did not involve extensive civil society advocacy.

Building Support Among Small and Medium States

All multilateral agreements, by definition, require support from multiple states. Small and medium states, however, lack the material and social dominance that great powers have to induce other states to join their weapons governance initiatives (e.g., they have fewer resources with which to offer side payments to induce states to support their initiative). Moreover, given that these states pursue multilateral weapons governance to fundamentally

[5] This draws on Finnemore's (2003) argument that developing new norms shifts the burden of proof for actors involved in a given activity from those who support the new norm to those who oppose it.

change relations between small and medium states and great powers, they are limited in the extent to which they can find mutually acceptable compromises with great powers. Thus, small and medium states rely on different strategies to build support than great powers do.

Specifically, such states tend to build support for multilateral weapons governance not by appealing to great powers, but through "collective power" based on recruiting as many small and medium states as possible to serve as a counterweight to great powers (Long 2017, 198). However, because relations are less asymmetric among small and medium states than between great powers and small/medium states, weapons governance by small and medium states tends to lack a single dominant leader. Consequently, multilateral weapons governance by these states is likely to be led by a coalition of states working to build broad support among other small and medium states. In examining multilateral governance of other issue areas, Deitelhoff and Wallbott (2012, 348-349) likewise find that coalition-building is an important strategy for small states to offset their disadvantages relative to great powers in multilateral negotiations and carry their initiatives through to a negotiated agreement. Building a coalition of small and medium states also facilitates burden-sharing among these states in negotiations and can "increase the discursive leverage of its members or the bargaining leverage as the endgame of negotiations" (Panke 2012, 390). To build support, coalition leaders emphasize small and medium states' shared histories and affinities, such as regional or post-colonial solidarity.

Choice of Institutional Format

As scholarship on forum shopping and contested multilateralism underscores, institutional formats (including for negotiating agreements) differ in the actors and agendas they privilege (e.g., Alter and Meunier 2009; Morse and Keohane 2014). Many institutions award special privileges, both formal and informal, to great powers. The UN Security Council is the most prominent example of formal privileges, but scholars also emphasize the informal 'pecking orders' that stratify states in multilateral institutions even when formal rules purport equality among states (Pouliot 2016). Moreover, great powers have historically created preferential rights and privileges for themselves when designing new institutions and agreements, and these institutional formats are often resilient to pressures for reform or change (Fehl 2014, 519; Bower 2017). Thus, in order to overcome these dynamics and create agreements that advance their goals, small and medium states must carefully choose negotiating forums that increase their agency and influence relative to great powers.

Specifically, small and medium states choose institutional formats that operate through procedural equality among states (i.e., 'one state, one vote') and on a majoritarian rather than consensus basis (e.g., the UN General Assembly). They may take advantage of existing institutions that fit this description, or may negotiate agreements outside of pre-existing institutions. The rationale for rejecting institutional formats that operate via inequality is clear: small and medium states seek to overcome the asymmetries in their relations with great powers rather than replicate them in negotiations. Although any state may block consensus (effectively vetoing an agreement), great powers are more able to offer side payments to potential consensus-blockers than small and medium states are. Other scholars have also found that consensus rules are generally a tool of great powers (Steinberg 2002, 342). For small and medium states seeking to change relations between states through new multilateral rules, the risks of great powers blocking consensus and derailing the project are serious. Given that small and medium states far outnumber great powers, majoritarian voting—either *de jure* or *de facto*—is an important tool for their efforts to reshape relations with great powers.

Content of the Agreement

To reduce their vulnerability and increase their agency and influence, multilateral weapons governance agreements led by small and medium states tend to have three distinguishing features. First, these agreements are usually legally binding treaties, rather than informal agreements. For small and medium states that lack great powers' material resources, international law takes on heightened importance as a tool for exercising agency and influence in world politics. International law is "an especially authoritative means for organizing international affairs" because it "[constitutes] actors and defining the boundaries of (un)acceptable action" (Bower 2015, 349). Legally binding treaties further empower small and medium states because they not only make rules for all states under their jurisdiction but can also contribute to legal norms or customary international law applicable to all states. Other scholars have also noted how legally binding agreements empower small and medium states relative to great powers (e.g., Ikenberry 2003, 544; Long 2017, 191).

Second, agreements led by small and medium states place the bulk of obligations and restrictions on great powers rather than small and medium states. To increase their agency and influence, they avoid placing further restrictions on themselves and instead place the burden of adjustment on great powers. Third, these agreements usually do not permit states to carve out exemptions or reservations to certain parts of the agreement.[6] Like the consensus rule in the negotiating process, exemptions or reservations to agreements allow great powers to preserve the status quo and mitigate small and medium states' efforts to reduce their vulnerability to great powers (Ikenberry 2003, 544). Rejecting such carve-outs also facilitates small and medium states' efforts to exercise greater influence and reduce their vulnerability to great powers: rejecting special privileges (for any state, but *de facto* for great powers) mitigates small and medium states' disadvantaged position relative to great powers and enables them to exercise greater agency.

Moreover, reflecting small and medium states' efforts to transform international relations, they characterize these agreements as contributing to the development of a new norm, rather than codifying existing norms. Thus, even when great powers do not initially support an agreement, small and medium states treat these agreements as important steps (and even successes) in building support for a norm and changing relations between states. Likewise, Bower (2017, 2) argues that "non-great power law-making" is based on the perception that the issues being governed can be addressed "via strong rules with incomplete membership

[6]The 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions is an exception in this regard.

that may be expanded over time." By reframing weapons and pursuing an agreement reflecting this reframing, these states attempt to over time create a new consensus regarding appropriate behavior, reduce their vulnerability to great powers, and increase their agency and influence relative to great powers. This norm-building element of multilateral weapons governance may be reflected in the text of the agreement and/or in how small and medium states interpret and evaluate the agreement's significance.

Table 1 summarizes the the observable implications of why and how small and medium states pursue multilateral weapons governance.

Table 1: Observable Implications

	Theoretical Expectation	Evidence
Why	Reducing Vulnerability	References to small and medium states' security being threatened by these weapons; references to their vulnerability relative to great powers; references to great powers making the rules
	Increasing Agency and Influence	References to contributions of small and medium states in governing weapons; references to the importance of their role in governing the issue; references to their present lack of agency and influence
How	Framing	Focus on destructive effects of weapons and association with great powers; linking weapon and vulnerability
	Building Support	Large coalition of small and medium states; emphasis on shared identity and experience
	Institutional Format	Majoritarian voting (no consensus requirement); procedural equality
	Content of Agreement	Legally binding; burden of adjustment primarily on great powers; no exemptions; references to norm-building

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

I demonstrate this theory through a case study of the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). In this case study, I assess small and medium states' motivations in pursuing the treaty and the process leading to the treaty, including how they framed the issue, built support, and the institutional format for negotiating the treaty. I then assess the outcome of this process in the content of the treaty and the reaction from great powers.[7]

I use the case of the TPNW because it is both representative of weapons governance led by small and medium states and it is a particularly salient case for understanding why and how such states pursue these types of agreements. Most multilateral weapons governance agreements led by small and medium states have governed either nuclear weapons or the arms trade, with agreements governing nuclear weapons representing approximately one-third of all multilateral weapons governance agreements led by small and medium states (Egel 2022). This case study also references and draws on other multilateral weapons governance agreements led by small and medium states: as the empirical analysis shows, proponents repeatedly drew similarities between the TPNW and other multilateral weapons governance agreements led by small and medium states, including the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty, the 2008 Cluster Munitions Convention, and regional nuclear weapon free zones. The TPNW is also an important case for demonstrating the significance of multilateral weapons governance agreements led by small and medium states, as these states pursued the treaty under extremely difficult conditions (specifically, great powers' opposition to the treaty and their near-exclusive possession of nuclear weapons). In addition, although many other scholars have examined the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty and 2008 Cluster Munitions Convention (e.g., Price 1998; Bower 2015; 2017; Petrova 2016; 2019), the 2017 TPNW is relatively under-studied[8] especially as an example of a broader phenomenon.

This case study draws on interviews conducted between 2019 and 2021 in Geneva,

[7]In Appendix C, I assess the most plausible alternative explanation—that states were motivated by and that the treaty's outcome was due to domestic political incentives in small and medium states.

[8]See Gibbons 2018 for an exception.

Switzerland and virtually with diplomats, international organization bureaucrats, and civil society involved in the process leading to the TPNW. These elite interviews are essential to understanding the motivations and process leading to the TPNW, including how the TPNW relates to broader geopolitics between states. Such information cannot be gleaned from public statements, and gaining interviewees' trust required months of relationship-building. Interviews were conducted on a not-for-attribution basis.[9]

Motivation

The process leading to the TPNW emerged in the early 2010s out of longstanding frustration with great powers' slow pace of disarmament, coupled with increasing stalemates between great powers and small and medium states in existing nuclear institutions. At first, the 2010 Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) raised small and medium states' expectations that they could make progress towards nuclear disarmament.[10] The Review Conference produced an action plan that noted the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons. This became a reference point for nonnuclear weapon states and NGOs, as an important recognition of the vulnerability that great powers' possession of nuclear weapons created for small and medium states (Interview I-04, November 29, 2019). Yet implementation of the action plan was "almost non-existent" (Interview G-09, January 23, 2020). Moreover, in the wake of the 2011 New START treaty, the United States and Russia also invested heavily in modernizing their nuclear arsenals, which many small and medium states viewed as reversing rather than advancing progress on nuclear disarmament. In short, small and medium states' agency and influence was increasingly stifled, and it appeared that their vulnerability to great powers was growing, rather

[9]Interviewees coded as 'G' refer to government officials (diplomats), interviewees coded as 'I' refer to international organization bureaucrats, and interviewees coded as 'C' refer to members of civil society organizations. See Appendix B for additional information on interview methodology.

[10]The 1968 NPT is widely considered the cornerstone of the status quo nuclear order. It identifies five nuclear weapon states: China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. States parties hold a review conference every five years to assess progress in treaty implementation and commit to new measures to further implement the treaty.

than decreasing.

As this frustration grew, however, small and medium states contrasted the situation in nuclear institutions to the legacies of the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty and the 2008 Cluster Munitions Convention, which small and medium states successfully pursued over the objections of great powers. The combination of these two factors created the conditions for the TPNW to emerge (Interview G-08, January 22, 2020). At the same time, small and medium states saw the TPNW not as an aberration or an effort to address an isolated issue, but as a broader effort to shape relations between states: the TPNW "should be understood as a symptom of a bigger problem. Tomorrow there will be a new initiative to produce a new framework to increase momentum and put pressure on the nuclear weapon states," according to one diplomat (Interview G-10, January 30, 2020). Small and medium states viewed these relatively recent examples of banning other weapons as successes that increased their agency and influence, despite great powers' opposition. Facing an increasingly untenable status quo with regard to nuclear weapons, they decided to pursue a new agreement to ban these weapons.

The TPNW was led by a core group of small and medium states: Austria, Ireland, Costa Rica, Mexico, New Zealand, and South Africa (Interview C-02, October 18, 2019). Most of these states had led earlier initiatives to govern various weapons, and had long been leaders in multilateralism. For example, Mexico was a leader in the creation of the Latin American Nuclear Weapon Free Zone, while Ireland and New Zealand were both leaders in the Cluster Munitions Convention. South Africa contributed its distinctive experience as having developed and then peacefully renounced nuclear weapons, and the moral authority associated with this stance, as well as its role in creating the African Nuclear Weapon Free Zone in 1996.

Small and medium states publicly drew direct links between great powers' possession of nuclear weapons and the vulnerability this created for small and medium states anywhere in the world. The Caribbean Community, for example, emphasized their vulnerable position as small island developing states and declared, "nuclear weapons have no utility in today's world. They are not useful deterrents but rather cultivate a state of insecurity and false defensiveness [...] with devastating impact on all of us, far beyond the parties directly involved in conflict" (CARICOM 2017). Likewise, small Pacific Island states repeatedly invoked the suffering that US, UK, and French nuclear testing had caused for their countries and the necessity of preventing such testing from taking place ever again (e.g., Fiji 2016; Palau 2016).

By emphasizing how nuclear weapons undermined, rather than advanced, international security, small and medium states drew on a different understanding of what security involved and where vulnerabilities came from. Instead of great powers' nuclear weapons providing security through deterrence, small and medium states viewed great powers' possession of nuclear weapons as threatening security and making small and medium states vulnerable to the devastating effects of potential nuclear weapons use. In this vein, the New Agenda Coalition (a political grouping comprising Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, and South Africa) declared, "Given the scale of devastation that nuclear weapons are designed to inflict, the fact that their consequences cannot be constrained within national borders and the ever increasing risk associated with a nuclear weapon detonation, [...] There can never be right hands for the wrong weapons" (New Agenda Coalition 2016).

The majority of these states were also leaders in the process leading to the TPNW. In asserting that no state could responsibly possess nuclear weapons, this statement fundamentally challenged the P5's dominance in world politics. It denied the P5's claim as the legitimate possessors of nuclear weapons, equating the United States' possession of nuclear weapons with North Korea's. In doing so, this claim challenged the idea that the P5 had special rights. For small and medium states, reducing their vulnerability to great powers involved rejecting great powers' special rights and privileges.

In articulating the need for the TPNW, small and medium states emphasized the links between the political and military implications of great powers' possession of nuclear weapons, and how these weapons threatened the security of small and medium states worldwide. According to one diplomat, “The unilateral imposition of great power politics makes it very important to have international law and rules of conduct at the international level. It’s particularly fundamental on issues of peace and security. We could really feel the destruction of the Second World War, even though we weren’t really directly affected, and the risk of the mass bombardment of cities” (Interview G-16, February 27, 2020). The P5’s possession of nuclear weapons made small and medium states vulnerable, regardless of their geographic location. At the same time, the P5’s structural dominance in international relations made it difficult for small and medium states to defend against or insulate themselves from the P5’s decisions.

Small and medium states also stressed how banning nuclear weapons was an expression of their agency in international relations. They repeatedly described the TPNW as giving them a greater voice in international relations (Interview I-04, November 20, 2020; Interview G-07, December 19, 2019; G-19, December 9, 2020). TPNW proponents viewed the treaty as making rules not only for nuclear weapons specifically, but for international relations more broadly. Banning nuclear weapons was a way to limit the unchecked authority of great powers and place small and medium states on an equal footing. It was an empowering process for these states, even before the treaty was formally negotiated and agreed. At the 2015 NPT Review Conference, the Austrian representative (on behalf of a group of 49 states) made this clear by declaring, “We have witnessed a clear shifting of the parameters, the focus, the tone and the balance of the discussion and the engagement of all countries of the treaty on nuclear weapons. Non-nuclear weapon states are today more empowered to demand their security concerns be taken in consideration on an equal basis” (Austria 2015).

Moreover, as one observer noted, “There’s the broader Global North-Global South dynamic regarding resentment about who makes the rules. The overlap between the P5 and the NPT nuclear weapon states is not lost on states in the Global South” (Interview I-04, November 29, 2019). Small and medium states connected the TPNW to other multilateral weapons governance initiatives led by small states, as evidence that such states could play an important role to play in banning nuclear weapons and deciding their own future. One diplomat explained, "We were promoters of the Tlatelolco Treaty[11] [...] It was a big step forward from the region that showed that nuclear disarmament is possible. We as a region can decide not to put nuclear weapons into our security doctrine" (Interview G-16, February 27, 2020). Small and medium states' agency in this earlier case of multilateral weapons governance served as a salient example for the TPNW fifty years later.

These states were acutely aware that the TPNW was a challenge to the P5's dominance. Yet they were proud of their efforts to claim greater agency instead of relying on the P5.[12] One diplomat emphasized that "there was a lot of aggressiveness from the P5 towards the [TPNW] negotiations, but [we are] always up to that. We have an equal footing in negotiating our own interests" (Interview G-04, December 4, 2019). Another TPNW proponent reflected, "It's a bit intimidating to think about what we're doing. [Nuclear weapons are] the ultimate power symbol and it's a very fundamental part of the international system that we created. And [we] have this treaty and this push where we're basically rallying the rest of the world to create a revolution against it" (Interview C-08, March 20, 2020). During the process leading to the TPNW, the slogan "democracy has come to disarmament" became a rallying cry for small and medium states, signaling their effort to increase their agency and influence, and transcend the hierarchy of international politics (Interview C-03, November 7, 2019).

From Goals to a Treaty

Framing Nuclear Weapons

To build momentum for the TPNW, small and medium states framed nuclear weapons in terms of their humanitarian effects. This was an intentional and strategic framing: as one proponent explained, "it cracks the inaccessibility of the issue: everyone's security is at risk with nuclear weapons. And [nuclear weapons] disproportionally affect countries in the

[11] The treaty that established a nuclear weapon free zone in Latin America

[12] Petrova (2019, 591, 611) similarly emphasizes the "mobilization of pride" in driving support for the Cluster Munitions Convention.

Global South. The humanitarian frame turns the issue into a justice issue" (Interview C-03, November 7, 2020). Moreover, framing nuclear weapons as a humanitarian issue, rather than in terms of deterrence and strategic stability, shifted authority from great powers that possess these weapons to those who are vulnerable to them. As another TPNW advocate explained, "the humanitarian frame affords power and agency to states and other actors that are not materially powerful. It mobilizes forces that in traditional framing and formats are silenced and sidelined. Small states' views are deemed not relevant or important in traditional fora. Looking at the harm caused by weapons leads to the need for weapons control" (Interview C-01, October 10, 2019). Framing nuclear weapons in this way also drew connections to previous initiatives led by small and medium states, such as the Mine Ban Treaty and the Cluster Munitions Convention: "Why exempt the category of weapons with the most devastating effects?" (Interview G-08, January 22, 2020).

In addition to small and medium states' framing of nuclear weapons in terms of their destructive effects, civil society also played a significant role in advancing this framing. At the 2010 NPT Review Conference, the International Committee of the Red Cross declared that the use of nuclear weapon under any circumstances would be incompatible with international humanitarian law. Although the Red Cross focused only on the use, not possession of nuclear weapons, this statement helped advance the framing of nuclear weapons as a humanitarian issue (Gibbons 2018, 16, 32). The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons took up this framing to advocate for a treaty banning nuclear weapons entirely, and ultimately received the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts. They helped frame nuclear weapons in a way that built momentum for a treaty banning them and advanced small and medium states' goals. However, while civil society organizations incurred very few risks and consequences by advocating for the TPNW, small and medium states faced substantial pressure and opposition from nuclear weapon states. Although civil society was instrumental in reframing nuclear weapons, the treaty was ultimately driven by these states' goals and resulted from their efforts. As one former diplomat emphasized, "the last word is with states: they [...] are the ones held accountable" (Interview G-02, November 27, 2019).

Framing nuclear weapons in terms of their destructive effects (i.e., the humanitarian frame) was not the only possible way to frame nuclear weapons. Great powers have traditionally framed nuclear weapons in terms of deterrence and strategic stability—which legitimized their continued possession of these weapons. As diplomats made clear, "The origin of the ban treaty has been to delegitimize nuclear weapons and deterrence. So the stakes are high" (Interview G-05, December 6, 2019). Framing nuclear weapons in terms of their destructive effects not only advanced small and medium states' goals, it also challenged the frame that underpinned great powers' dominance. Nuclear weapon states and their allies understood this implications of this framing. As one diplomat complained, "As an ally to nuclear weapon states, you're perceived as betraying the cause when you talk about humanitarian effects" (Interview G-14, February 20, 2020).

Building Support Among Small and Medium States

The P5 opposed the TPNW throughout the process leading to it and put significant pressure on small and medium states to oppose it as well. TPNW proponents did not seek to convince the P5 to support the treaty but instead worked to build momentum among a vast coalition of small and medium states. Supporting the treaty was not costless for these states: "It's quite risky [...] to do something against the big powers" (Interview I-06, March 10, 2020). One diplomat characterized small and medium states' support of the TPNW despite P5 pressure to oppose it as "brave" and noted the number of countries supporting the TPNW—representing the vast majority of states in the world—as evidence of the initiative's strength (Interview G-04, December 4, 2019).

To build support for the TPNW, members of the cross-regional core group connected the TPNW to different regions' experiences with the harmful effects of nuclear weapons. In Latin American, proponents underscored the region's role as the first nuclear weapon free zone, and the pride that Latin American states had in that history (Interview G-16, February 27, 2020; Interview G-20, May 12, 2021). In Africa, TPNW leaders linked their concerns over vulnerabilities to the harmful legacy of French nuclear testing in Algeria. They also highlighted post-apartheid South Africa's unique role in giving up and dismantling the apartheid regime's nuclear weapons as a example of small states' agency in eliminating nuclear weapons (Interview G-04, December 4, 2019; Interview C-08, March 20, 2020). To build support among Pacific Island states, the core group emphasized the destructive, long-term effects of nuclear weapons testing in the region (Interview G-16, February 27, 2020).

In addition to building support through a regional approach, proponents built support by emphasizing existing bonds between small and medium states, including many states' shared postcolonial and/or nonaligned identity, and their shared experience with subjugation vis-à-vis the great powers (Interview G-07, December 17, 2019). To explain how the core group built support for the TPNW, one diplomat stated, "Our trustworthiness stems from our national identity as a post-colonial state [...] This gave us a shared identity with the nonaligned movement" (Interview G-07, December 17, 2019). The core group also emphasized small and medium states' history of partnerships on other agreements to ban weapons without the support of great powers: "the key players in the TPNW were our partners in the Mine Ban Treaty and the Cluster Munitions Convention—there's a clear overlap in Latin America and Africa" (Interview G-13, February 18, 2020). Proponents further underscored the importance of a large mass of small and medium states supporting the treaty, as a demonstration of the TPNW's legitimacy and ability to significantly change international relations (Interview I-05, March 5, 2020). These efforts to build support paid off: in total, 124 small and medium states participated in the TPNW negotiations and 122 voted to adopt the treaty.

Choosing the Institutional Format

In addition to framing the issue and building a broad coalition, controlling the institutional format for negotiations was central to achieving a treaty that reduced small and medium states' vulnerability and increased their agency and influence. Specifically, small and medium states rejected institutions that operated via consensus, in order to prevent great powers from blocking an agreement supported by a far greater mass of small and medium states. Instead, the mandate to negotiate a treaty prohibiting nuclear weapons came from the UN General Assembly in December 2016 (Resolution 71/258). Although Resolution 71/258 had broad support among small and medium states and was sponsored by 57 states (an unusually large number for a General Assembly resolution), it was far from a consensus agreement: it was passed by a vote of 113 in favor to 35 against, with 13 abstentions. France, Russia, Israel, the United Kingdom, and the United States all voted against the resolution, while China, India, and Pakistan abstained (North Korea was not present for the vote).[13] TNPW supporters brought the vote on whether to negotiate a treaty banning nuclear weapons to the General Assembly—where no state has a veto—because "for anything we wanted to move forward, we needed to move at the General Assembly, because of the majority vote" (Interview G-20, May 12, 2021). Not only was this approach unusual for a treaty governing nuclear weapons, it "was a blow to the governance system dominated by the P5. Negotiating without the right of veto made it possible to achieve the treaty. It was a democratization of international relations, a rejection of the old system" (Interview G-08, January 22, 2020). In explaining the importance of negotiating under the General Assembly's rules, the ambassador of New Zealand contrasted the General Assembly to other institutional formats for multilateral weapons governance, such as the Conference on Disarmament, which operate via consensus. She argued that the Conference on Disarmament's

> "limited membership and archaic rules of procedure are other reasons why it is an improbable forum for the conduct of negotiations on issues, such as nuclear disarmament, in which every member of the international community has a stake. The only truly representative forum for multilateral negotiations of this sort remains the United Nations General Assembly" (New Zealand 2016).

In contrast, one diplomat from a nuclear weapon state acknowledged the importance of such institutions for protecting the interests of great powers: "We cherish the [Conference

[13]The nuclear weapon states outside the P5 were largely silent on the TPNW, neither supporting it nor aggressively opposing it.

on Disarmament] because we're protected by the consensus rule there" (Interview G-11, January 30, 2020). The Conference on Disarmament has been deadlocked for over twenty years and has produced no concrete results since the mid-1990s. Yet it preserves the status quo dominance of great powers. For small and medium states, it was essential to find a negotiating format for the TPNW that avoided such a scenario.

Beyond the mandate to negotiate the treaty, the negotiating sessions in March, June, and July 2017 also operated on a majoritarian basis. 124 states—mostly from the Global South and none of which possessed nuclear weapons—participated in these negotiations. The TPNW was adopted on July 7, 2017 by a vote of 122 in favor, 1 abstention (Singapore) and 1 vote against (the Netherlands—the only NATO member to attend the negotiations). The decision to vote by majority on adopting a treaty rather than seeking consensus was an intentional strategy to achieve a treaty that advanced small and medium states' goals. As one participant explained, "a treaty that is voted on by a majoritarian rule goes much further than a consensus one. Consensus is the lowest possible denominator" (Interview I-06, March 10, 2020). Had the TPNW negotiations required consensus, they would not have produced an agreed treaty.

The Treaty

The TPNW entered into force on January 22, 2021, with 51 ratifications. The TPNW is primarily a prohibition treaty: Article 1 of the treaty prohibits states from producing, manufacturing testing, possessing, stockpiling, using, threatening to use, transferring, receiving transfers of, and stationing nuclear weapons. This does not require nonnuclear states outside of nuclear alliances to make changes to their behavior: it prohibits something they do not have and activities in which they do not engage. Instead, the treaty's obligations primarily impose restrictions on great powers and their allies. They require states to declare any nuclear weapons they possess and then destroy these weapons. These obligations require nuclear weapon states and nuclear-allied states to change their behavior if they join the TPNW. Article 16 of the TPNW also states that the treaty shall not be subject to reservations, reflecting small and medium states' effort to exert authority over great powers.

Avoiding additional burdens for small and medium states was an intentional element of the treaty: during negotiations, these states frequently referenced how many nonproliferation obligations they had already undertaken in other treaties and argued that the obligations and restrictions of this treaty should be primarily on nuclear weapon states (Interview G-17, February 27, 2020). The TPNW's obligations that would require changes by small and medium states refer to assisting and compensating victims of nuclear weapons production, testing, and use, as well as environmental remediation. These provisions reflect the humanitarian framing of nuclear weapons, and small and medium states' efforts to limit their vulnerability to great powers' use of nuclear weapons. At the same time, the requirement to provide assistance is caveated in Article 7 by the phrase "Each State Party in a position to do so..."; avoiding placing additional requirements on small and medium states (Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons 2017). The TPNW is also notable for what it does not include: it does not include detailed provisions for verification, inspections, or other obligations that go beyond what small and medium states have already committed to in other treaties governing nuclear weapons.

Producing a legally binding treaty, rather than a political agreement, was important for small and medium states because "for small states, international law is paramount [...] It defends us. Legal instruments can result in norms, but political declarations are not strong enough to safeguard the interests of small states" (Interview G-07, December 17, 2019). They viewed international law, as expressed in international treaties, as "the great equalizer in international relations" (Interview G-16, February 27, 2020). They also viewed the treaty as a norm-building instrument whose importance will continue to grow. Multiple diplomats emphasized that they did not believe the treaty would lead to the P5 relinquishing their nuclear weapons in the immediate future, but that they were instead "playing the long game" and creating a new norm around nuclear weapons (Interview G-07, December 17, 2019; Interview G-08, January 22 2020; Interview G-13, February 18, 2020).

Reactions From Great Powers

Rather than ignore the TPNW, great powers, especially the United States and France, launched a vigorous campaign to dismiss the initiative's importance both during and after the treaty negotiations (and under both the Obama and Trump presidencies in the United States). Immediately after the TPNW negotiations concluded in July 2017, the United States, France, and the United Kingdom released a joint statement declaring that they had no intention of signing or ratifying the treaty, and that the TPNW

> "clearly disregards the realities of the international security environment. Accession to the ban treaty is incompatible with the policy of nuclear deterrence, which has been essential to keeping the peace in Europe and North Asia for over 70 years. A purported ban on nuclear weapons that does not address the security concerns that continue to make nuclear deterrence necessary cannot result in the elimination of a single nuclear weapon and will not enhance any country's security, nor international peace and security" (United States, United Kingdom, and France 2017).

Russia similarly announced its view that the TPNW "contradicts the NPT and undermines the international nuclear non-proliferation regime. The TPNW provokes a sense of discord within the international community, distracting it from the real task of establishing the necessary conditions for continuing the process of nuclear disarmament" (Russian Federation 2018). Yet as one diplomat explained, in multilateral negotiations "we say things are 'unrealistic' or 'impractical' to undermine the other side" (Interview G-14, February 20, 2020). By issuing such aggressive statements that blamed the TPNW for creating divisions between states, the P5's attempt to undermine the treaty highlighted its significance and acknowledged that it posed a potent threat to their status quo dominance. TPNW proponents recognized this: if the P5 "didn't care about this treaty because they didn't join it, then they wouldn't care about who signs it. But they care—a lot. And it shows that [the TPNW is] powerful. They're exposing their weakness" (Interview C-08, March 20, 2020).

The United States, United Kingdom, and France also put substantial pressure on their allies—and in the case of France, former colonies—to reject the TPNW. This "neocolonial bullying" further revealed the extent to which they considered the TPNW to be a threat (Interview C-03, November 7, 2019; Interview G-16, February 27, 2020). By devoting so much attention to the treaty, rather than ignoring it, great powers sent an unmistakable signal that the treaty was an important new development. As a treaty banning nuclear weapons without the consent of great powers, the TPNW was a serious challenge to great powers' continued dominance. The United States was particularly concerned that if the TPNW successful stigmatized great powers' possession of nuclear weapons, it could limit the US ability to employ those weapons for deterrence and could undermine the US alliance system (Ford 2017). In contrast, the nuclear weapon states outside the P5 largely ignored the TPNW. Given that their possession of nuclear weapons was already stigmatized, the TPNW did not pose a significant challenge to their standing. Although the P5 are extremely unlikely to ever join the TPNW, the TPNW has succeeded in increasing small and medium states' agency and influence in world politics. It also has created a vehicle for reducing their vulnerability, if their efforts to create a new norm stigmatizing all possession of nuclear weapons bear fruit.

Conclusion

As this article demonstrates, multilateral weapons governance is not only a tool for great powers, but is also an important means for small and medium states to challenge great powers' dominance. Overlooking why and how small and medium states pursue multilateral weapons governance risks not only misunderstanding the conditions under which multilateral weapons governance is likely to occur and the types of agreements it produces, but also risks under-appreciating the frequency of small and medium states' efforts to challenge great powers' dominance. Moreover, in showing how these states drew links between the TPNW and earlier multilateral weapons governance initiatives led by small and medium states, this article also shows that the TPNW was not an anomaly in multilateral weapons governance but part of a broader trend. This framework can be applied to explain both historical cases of multilateral weapons governance by small and medium states, including nuclear weapon free zones and the 1979 Moon Agreement, as well as small and medium states' current multilateral efforts to ban autonomous weapons and regulate the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

In identifying the goals that small and medium states seek through multilateral weapons governance, this article also has important implications for scholars and policymakers focused on the United States and other great powers. This article indicates that a lack of leadership from the United States and other great powers can be filled by small and medium states seeking to advance divergent goals. If such states take action even when great powers withdraw from multilateral weapons governance, this may make it more difficult for great powers to advance their own priorities in this area. Great powers should not take small and medium states' support or consent for granted.

Furthermore, examining why and how small and medium states pursue multilateral weapons governance highlights the importance of treating multilateralism and global governance as processes of contestation in world politics, rather than solely as processes of cooperation and absolute gains. When multilateral initiatives may seem ineffective for certain purposes (e.g., enhancing strategic stability or reducing risks of miscommunication and miscalculation), the intent behind such initiatives may be to advance an entirely different set of goals (e.g., increasing small and medium states' agency and influence). In addition, taking these states' goals seriously reveals that issues often treated as barriers to weapons governance may not be such obstacles, depending on the objectives that states actually pursue. For example, some scholars argue that a need for both transparency and secrecy makes arms control difficult to achieve (Coe and Vaynman 2020). Yet these concerns were absent from the TPNW negotiations and did not impede small and medium states' efforts.

This article also demonstrates that multilateral weapons governance is not a process led only by wealthy European small states that have traditionally been the focus of studies on small states in world politics (e.g., Baker Fox 1959; Keohane 1969; Panke 2012). Neither is multilateral weapons governance led by small and medium states reducible to divisions between the Global North and the Global South: the TPNW was led by a cross-regional coalition of small and medium states and the goals driving multilateral weapons governance are applicable to small states both in the Global North and Global South. Yet although the scope of this article is limited to multilateral weapons governance, small and medium states seek to reduce their vulnerability and exercise greater agency and influence in other areas of international relations as well. The theory developed here can also be applied to understand why and how small and medium states pursue agreements in other areas of global governance. Global economic governance, for example, is also characterized by hierarchical relations between great powers and small and medium states. The theory developed in this article may thus be particularly relevant for understanding why and how such states pursue multilateral economic governance agreements, or contribute to the growing literature on small states in multilateral climate and environmental governance (e.g., Deitelhoff and Wallbott 2012; Corbett, Yi-chong, and Weller 2019). In assessing why and how small states pursue multilateral weapons governance, this article advances understandings of the role of multilateral agreements and global governance as political tools for small and medium states in international relations.

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Qualitative Appendix: Weapons Governance by the Weak

Appendix A: Additional Cases

The following nineteen cases are the multilateral weapons governance agreements led by small/medium states that have been concluded since World War II. Leadership (which takes a value of small/medium, great powers, or mixed) is coded based on the primary actors advocating for an outcome (in this context, a particular type of weapons governance). Leadership coding decisions are based on primary accounts from participants in each case (e.g., interviews, archival documents, or public writings) and secondary sources from scholars.

African Nuclear Weapon Free Zone

Agreement Governing the Activities of States on the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies (Moon Agreement)

Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention

Arms Trade Treaty

Central African Convention for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons, Their Ammunition and All Parts and Components That Can Be Used For Their Manufacture, Repair and Assembly (Kinshasa Convention)

Central Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone

Convention on Cluster Munitions

Declaration of San Salvador on Confidence and Security-Building Measures

ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, Their Ammunition, and Other Related Materials

Inter-American Convention Against the Illicit Manufacturing and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives, and Other Related Material (CIFTA)

International Convention Against the Recruitment, Use, Financing, and Training of Mercenaries

International Tracing Instrument

Latin American Nuclear Weapon Free Zone

Nairobi Protocol for the Prevention, Control and Reduction of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the Great Lakes Region and the Horn of Africa

OAU Convention for the Elimination of Mercenaries in Africa

SADC Protocol on the Control of Firearms, Ammunition, and Other Related Material

South Pacific Nuclear Weapon Free Zone

Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone

Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

Appendix B: Interview Methodology

The interview strategy was based on developing a comprehensive understanding of the process leading to the TPNW, its significance for world politics, and how it was interpreted by key stakeholders. Rather than using random sampling, I identified participants in the negotiations and proceeded using the 'snowball' method to identify and reach out to additional participants and stakeholders. I continued this approach until I reached data saturation and respondents no longer provided relevant new information that previous respondents had not already shared.

I conducted interviews with both TPNW supporters and skeptics, as well as individuals across a wide range of seniority (from entry-level staff to ambassadors), to provide a diversity of views and guard against groupthink. 57 percent of interviews were with current or former government officials, 28 percent were with civil society activists or academics who participated in the TPNW process, and 15 percent were with bureaucrats working for international organizations. Interviews were conducted on a not-for-attribution basis. This was essential for eliciting candid answers from respondents and in several cases, for their willingness to participate in the interview altogether.

Regarding the content of the interviews, respondents were asked different questions based on their engagement with the TPNW. For example, some respondents were not present at the negotiations but were deeply involved in their country's decision to ratify the agreement (or reject the agreement). They were thus not asked about the negotiation process but about how their government viewed the treaty's significance and whether domestic politics affected their country's position. In addition to their factual recollection of specific events, respondents were also asked about their assessments of the success or failure of different strategies and outcomes. However, all factual information cited from interviews was verified by at least two respondents, and all assessments of significance and/or relationships were also shared by at least two respondents.

Appendix C: Domestic Politics as an Alternative Explanation

Many scholars have emphasized the importance of domestic politics for driving states' foreign policies, particularly regarding the development of nuclear weapons programs. Some stress the importance of whether certain leaders, parties, or coalitions are in power domestically as a condition for states' behavior in related areas. For example, Kreps, Saunders, and Schultz (2018) argue that Democratic presidents face greater hurdles in securing Congressional ratification of bilateral arms control treaties than Republican presidents do (although they find that these hurdles can be surmounted). Others focus on the role of domestic popular support and public opinion in driving their government to take a more active role in addressing international issues. For example, Knopf (1998) contends that US domestic activism against nuclear weapons in the 1980s led the United States to enter into bilateral strategic arms control negotiations with the USSR. Although these examples focus on bilateral rather than multilateral agreements, they suggest that domestic politics may have important effects on states' international engagement on weapons governance.

Given the extensive literature on domestic politics driving nuclear proliferation decisions,[1] some might questions whether the TPNW was also driven by domestic politics; either through popular pressure on domestic leaders or through foreign policy changes that occurred as a result of a new party or coalition coming to power. Instead, it is striking how little domestic

[1] See Saunders 2019 for a review essay.

politics mattered for why and how small and medium states pursued the TPNW, why great powers opposed it, and the outcome of the process. In multiple interviews, diplomats were emphatic that their country's support for the TPNW was unquestionable—or conversely, that their country would never support the TPNW. As one diplomat from a TPNW-supporting state explained, "I joined the foreign ministry in 1994. Every government I've seen has had strong paragraphs on disarmament. Every parliamentary resolution I've seen in past twenty-five years on disarmament has been very strong" (Interview G-21, May 27, 2021). According to a diplomat from a different country, "There's no questioning on this for any political party [...] This is about our principles of foreign policy in our constitution. There is uniformity in the country on this issue" (Interview G-16, February 27, 2020). Still another stated, "Disarmament is rooted in the DNA of [our] foreign policy. It doesn't matter what political party you talk about" (Interview G-20, May 12, 2021). Others agreed: "they're not just policy positions that change with the government: for France, for Ireland, [for us], these are really fundamental positions that are really inherent to our national identity. It would be extremely unlikely for any government to change that" (Interview G-19, December 9, 2020). Diplomats from states that opposed the TPNW also dismissed the idea that their country's position on the issue would change if another party or coalition came to power: "If we did have a shift in government position, it's unclear how big the switch would be—maybe we'd end up like Sweden; coming close to the treaty but not signing it" (Interview G-13, February 18, 2020). Many diplomats (both in countries that supported the TPNW and those that opposed it) also emphasized how little popular pressure there was domestically on nuclear disarmament. For one, "if you ask the general public, it's not an issue that would decide elections [...] It's a marginal issue for most" (Interview G-09, January 23, 2020). Others agreed that "there's no public debate on the issue" (Interview G-15, February 21, 2020) domestically and "there's no public opposition to it but it's not really a major issue [...] nobody disagrees with it as a policy so there's not much of interest" (Interview G-19, December 9, 2020).

Even in the few cases where domestic political changes may have shifted an individual country's position on the TPNW, such changes did not affect the overall course of negotiations. The most notable case of this is the Norwegian government: Norway hosted the first conference on the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons in 2013, and funded a significant amount of civil society research and advocacy on nuclear disarmament. After the 2013 election brought a change in the governing coalition—from the center-left coalition of the Labour Party, Centre Party, and Socialist Left to the center-right coalition of the Conservative Party and the Progress Party—Norway reversed this stance. Yet the TPNW initiative continued without Norway: although this shift in domestic politics altered Norway's engagement with the TPNW, it did not stop or even significantly hinder the initiative overall. Likewise, the Netherlands was the only NATO member to attend the TPNW negotiations, and did so due to a mandate from Parliament. The Netherlands was the only country to vote no on adopting the treaty. Yet this too did not stop the treaty: consensus was intentionally not a requirement for the treaty to be adopted and many other countries signed and ratified the treaty, bringing it into force in January 2020. Although domestic politics may potentially play a more significant role in some states' decision to ratify the TPNW in the future, domestic politics played at best a marginal role in the process leading to the TPNW.

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