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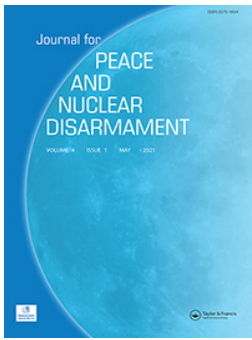
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# Nuclear Weapons and Adversarial Politics: Bursting the Abolitionist “Consensus”

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## ABSTRACT

How will the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) shape the broader pursuit of nuclear abolition? TPNW critics have argued that the new agreement is likely to fuel divisions between nuclear and non-nuclear-weapon states, undermining consensus and hampering existing efforts at reducing and eliminating nuclear arms. In this commentary, I argue that one of the TPNW's key strengths and contributions is precisely that it pierces the feigned abolitionist consensus, creating room for adversarial politics and the advancement of an alternative view of nuclear order and security.

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## Introduction

How will the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) shape the pursuit of nuclear abolition? Supporters of the TPNW hope the new agreement can provide a focal point for stigmatising nuclear arms and advancing a new nuclear order founded on respect for humanitarian law and principles. TPNW opponents, for their part, have expressed concern that the new agreement might fuel diplomatic polarisation between nuclear and non-nuclear-weapon states, hampering established efforts at reducing and eliminating nuclear arms. Admittedly, this argument is often voiced by political operators who, beyond vague grandiloquence about the desirability of nuclear disarmament in the future, show every indication of being fully signed up to, or at any rate unwilling to oppose, the continuous rebuilding of nuclear armouries in the present. Such interventions, then, might usefully be understood as examples of what one might call “strategic concern trolling”, that is, as calculated rhetorical actions executed to muddy debate and undermine advocates of political change. That said, versions of the claim that the TPNW might undercut the pursuit of practical nuclear disarmament measures have also been offered by prominent scholars of nuclear norms and governance, including Nina Tannenwald (2020, 116) and Harald Müller and Carmen Wunderlich (2020, 182).

According to Müller and Wunderlich, the sharpening of the debate that has accompanied the emergence of the TPNW has led to “a spiral of hostile emotions” that is actively doing damage to the practice of nuclear disarmament and the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Representatives of both sides should thus seek

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to moderate their attitudes and “reassure each other that, despite fundamental disagreements about strategy, path, timing, and circumstances of nuclear disarmament, they are both looking for ways to bring it closer” (Müller and Wunderlich 2020, 183–184). The trouble with this position is that, for all the aspirational talking-points and good intentions incanted at the Palais des Nations in Geneva and the UN headquarters in New York, there is little evidence that the current nuclear-armed states are in any way committed to the elimination of their nuclear armouries – at least not in any way that has meaningful consequences for their long-term defence strategies, foreign policies, or arms procurement priorities. In the words of Campbell Craig and Ruzicka (2013, 341), in more than half a century, and under varying security environments, none of the established nuclear powers “have moved even nominally toward a policy of actual disarmament.” Undeniably, nuclear-armed leaders routinely pledge their allegiance to the goal of nuclear abolition, and some nuclear-armed states have over the last few decades significantly reduced the number of nuclear warheads in their possession, resulting in a marked drop in the overall number of nuclear weapons in the world. Yet, in the absence of deeper policy changes, numerical reductions can hardly be taken as evidence of anything other than a willingness to practice nuclear deterrence at a lower level of armament (Egeland 2020).

### **A Nuclear Disarmament Consensus?**

While analysts of nuclear proliferation seldom attach much or any significance to cheap talk of peaceful intentions by suspected proliferators, disarmament experts regularly write their policy recommendations on the premise that abolitionist rhetoric by nuclear-armed leaders is or should be read as sincere. For example, according to an expert group advising the government of Japan, abolition remains elusive not because the nuclear-armed states lack any meaningful intention or willingness to disarm, but in part because the diplomatic debate is in want of the politeness and “civility in discourse” that would be required for greater cooperation on the practical implementation of “our common goal of a world without nuclear weapons” (Group of Eminent Persons for the Substantive Advancement of Nuclear Disarmament 2019, 1, 6). Similarly, the “stepping stones approach” developed by the think tank BASIC and promoted through the Stockholm Initiative for Nuclear Disarmament is explicitly founded on the premise that all states share a goal of nuclear abolition and that the challenge for disarmament advocates is to come up with and stimulate the right sequence of bite-sized managerial measures that might unblock a temporary, “current deadlock” (Ingram and Downman 2019, 2).

Methodologically, this privileging of words over actions as the ultimate indicators of actors’ intentions or desires defies the standard social scientific formula for inferring preferences, jokingly defined by Paul Collier (2000, 92) in the following terms: “If someone says ‘I don’t like chocolates’ but keeps on eating them, we infer that she really does like chocolates” (or suffers from a grave eating disorder). In the field of nuclear policy, nuclear-armed leaders’ talk of abolition has for decades been belied by their governments’ continued investments into expanding, improving, or modernising nuclear capabilities, refusal to implement “consensus” disarmament commitments, scant efforts at negotiating transformative agreements or making concessions, and explicit nuclear threat-making and repeated statements about the necessity and legitimacy of nuclear

deterrence. Notwithstanding decades of abolitionist chatter, the convening of a nuclear disarmament summit bringing together the world's nuclear-armed leaders for actual negotiations on elimination has hardly even been attempted, let alone carried out.

As an example of how current nuclear-armed leaders think about strategic change and disarmament, the French Minister of the Armed Forces recently expressed awe at the thought that many of the sailors expected to man the nuclear-armed submarines currently under development in France “are not born yet” (Vavasseur 2021). When the first draft of this article was written, the sitting defence minister of the world's most powerful state was a former corporate lobbyist for one of the world's largest nuclear arms contractors. Trump administration Secretary of Defense Mark Esper's transfer from Raytheon to the Pentagon reportedly involved agreement on a deferred compensation package to be paid out in 2022 – based partly on the former's stock price (Wilson 2017). As it turned out, Esper's successor as US Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin of the Biden administration, came to the Pentagon from a position at Raytheon's Board. Esper's predecessor, for his part, Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, entered government on the back of a position on the Board of General Dynamics, the lead manufacturer of the ballistic missile submarines that carry America's sea-based nuclear forces. Presidents Biden, Trump, Obama, and Bush all accepted large donations from leading nuclear weapons makers during their election campaigns (Center for Responsive Politics 2021). The nuclear-armed states' “revealed preferences”, in other words, are not exactly indicative of a meaningful commitment to nuclear abolition.

In this context, pleas to concentrate on the international community's alleged shared vision of a world without nuclear weapons risks playing into the hands of those keen to retain, modernise, and profit from nuclear arms for the foreseeable future. After all, since the 1960s, virtually all politically astute defenders of nuclear armament have elected to oppose disarmament at the level of process, acquiescing to the long-term “vision” of a nuclear-weapon-free future while quietly opposing, frustrating, or derailing any practical measure that might make such a future a reality (see Pelopidas 2021). As one scholar points out, as early as the Truman administration, the US government resolved to “manage” demands for disarmament and world government “essentially by accepting the general concerns and language of advocates of international control, but attaching its own conditions” (Meyer 1993, 462). Fuelling public apathy and deflecting pressures for decisive governmental action, pro-nuclear actors have sought to de-politicise and down-play nuclear weapons politics by framing the elimination of nuclear arsenals as a technical and, ultimately, boring question of implementation that ordinary citizens, civil society organisations, and non-nuclear-weapon states ought not to worry about (see Epstein 1976; Wittner 2009; See also Weichselbraun 2016, 106–12). Since everyone already agree on the nuclear zero ambition, so goes the implicit (wishful) argument, there is no need for institutional contestation, norm creation, or political mobilisation – all that is needed are well-mannered, sequestered diplomatic consultations about process. There is no need, in other words, to do anything that might cause political commotion, turbulence, or inconvenience.

One of the key legitimisation strategies of the actor-networks working to sustain nuclear possession has been to reduce political pressure, scrutiny, and attention by feigning or exaggerating the level of agreement in nuclear weapons politics (Epstein 1976, 246; Johnson 2006, 73–74; Meyer 1993). As long as this continues to be the case, nominally

abolitionist approaches premised on the supposed existence of an underlying disarmament consensus will remain virtually indistinguishable from the PR strategies of actors that are either actively lobbying to entrench and modernise nuclear arsenals or simply unwilling to act on their declared abolitionist intentions in a way that would actually make a difference. Of course, given strong public support in most countries for the creation of a nuclear-weapon-free world (see e.g. Baron, Gibbons, and Herzog 2020; Kafura 2020; Egeland and Pelopidas 2021), the favoured rhetorical position for those keen to avoid brushing up against both public opinion and the nuclear powers that be is that of the “tragic disarmer” – the ill-fated abolitionist who is committed to doing “everything” in their power to promote nuclear zero but, when it comes down to it, is forever held back from actually renouncing nuclear deterrence by some unfortunate holdup or obstacle, be it a discombobulating technicality or procedural problem, a regrettable unavailability of “concrete measures” or sufficient verification measures, intransigence by “bad actors”, or solidarity with unspecified “allies and partners”. In reality, of course, these “obstacles” are not bugs, but features, of the extant nuclear order (Egeland 2021).

### **Bringing Politics Back In**

Perhaps the most central reason why the nuclear-armed states and many of their allies have opposed the TPNW is precisely that it punctures the nominal “consensus” on nuclear disarmament, making it more difficult for the managers of the status quo to combine business-as-usual nuclear deterrence practices with a halfway convincing façade of abolitionism. One of the primary contributions of the TPNW, in this view, is to force a choice – to compel the individuals, states, and political parties that in theory support abolition but in practice have been unwilling to forswear the use of nuclear weapons to either reconsider their position or reveal that they are in fact not at all prepared to do “everything” in their power to advance nuclear disarmament, thus recasting them from their favoured role of the tragic disarmer to the less convenient role of the ridiculous prevaricator (see Payne 2020 on “stigmatization by ridicule”). The TPNW, in other words, helps illuminate the very real political fault lines underpinning the global nuclear order, piercing the contrived organic unity of “the disarmament community”.

Being put on the spot by the TPNW is no doubt experienced as unfair or uncomfortable by the world’s “tragic disarmers”, be they domestic or international political actors. Yet the creation of visible political dividing lines is a prerequisite not only for policy change but also democratic good governance more broadly. Democracy, after all, breaks down in the absence of political contestation, adversarial processes, and competition between alternative viewpoints (Dahl 1985). Diplomatic efforts and analysis premised on the assumption that there are no fundamental disagreements in nuclear weapons politics – that although states occasionally disagree about disarmament strategy and timing they agree that nuclear weapons are at some level unacceptable and must be eliminated – are in this view deeply problematic with respect to democratic governance. This is the case, for example, with the current Stockholm Initiative for Nuclear Disarmament, a nominal effort by a coalition of non-nuclear powers at revitalising the disarmament agenda. Based on the convenient assumption that all states are sincerely committed to the elimination of nuclear weapons and, by extension, that disarmament can be achieved

without disrupting extant power structures, delegitimising nuclear weapons, or antagonising the nuclear-armed states or the corporations that produce their weapons, the Stockholm Initiative glosses over deeply contradictory positions, obfuscates political realities, and shields the actors opposing disarmament from pressure. In addition, given that the initiative contains no new proposals or demands beyond what the states involved have already promoted nonstop for decades, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the Stockholm Initiative is a fancy conceptual label for business as usual – at worst a deliberate attempt at misleading people with limited knowledge about the specifics of nuclear disarmament diplomacy into thinking that “something is being done” when in reality everything continues exactly as before. In many if not most countries – certainly in the nuclear-armed states and in their spheres of influence – voters have never been offered meaningful alternatives to choose from with respect to nuclear policy, with all dominant parties committed to the same vague abolitionist end goal and the same (decreasingly credible) managerial policy agenda. The TPNW promises to upend this “consensus” in a range of countries, providing a new political alternative.

Internationally, the architects of the new agreement have presented the nuclear-armed states and their allies with a choice between the devil of visibly attacking a good faith disarmament effort – thus drawing attention both to the TPNW and their own de facto hostility to renouncing the potential use of nuclear weapons – and the deep blue sea of allowing an instrument designed to delegitimise nuclear arms to gain traction. That being said, the TPNW is hardly all bad news for the nuclear-armed states. While the TPNW could have gone further by making the IAEA Additional Protocol mandatory for all states without exceptions, it locks down and codifies progress on non-proliferation safeguards in non-nuclear-weapon states by legally obliging more than two thirds of its prospective parties (UN member states and permanent observers) to upholding the Additional Protocol, an instrument that remains optional under the NPT. More generally, the humanitarian logic manifested by the TPNW would appear ipso facto more conducive to cooperation on non-proliferation than the transactional logic that has dominated much NPT diplomacy to date. Whereas traditional thinking and the narrative of an NPT “grand bargain” have invited non-nuclear-weapon states to view multilateral nuclear diplomacy as a form of bargaining or exchange – that is, for non-nuclear-weapon states to premise their support for non-proliferation measures on gestures towards disarmament by the nuclear-weapon states – the TPNW frames any use, development, and possession of nuclear weapons as unconditionally unacceptable. If your position is the latter, it makes little sense to qualify your support for non-proliferation on the behaviour of others.

## Pathways to Change

In the short term, the TPNW is likely to continue to grow its support base among non-nuclear-weapon states. While it is clear that advocates have a monumental task ahead of them, with every additional signature and ratification, the balance shifts in favour of adherence, increasing the pressure on holdouts. Perceptive observers have already noticed changes to the way in which erstwhile critics represent the Treaty (Sauer and Nardon 2020). “In a subtle diplomatic move”, notes former Canadian ambassador Doug Roche (2020), “the Government of Canada has ceased its opposition and now



‘acknowledges’ the reason for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.” Belgium, another formerly ardent opponent of the TPNW, is now governed on the basis of a policy platform that calls on Belgium to “explore how to strengthen the multilateral non-proliferation framework and how the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons can give new impetus to multilateral nuclear disarmament” (ICAN 2020). The Norwegian Labour Party, the largest party in the Norwegian Parliament, has since 2017 gradually shifted from a position of guarded opposition to the TPNW to one of cautious support. At its conference in April 2021, the party resolved that signature of the TPNW was impossible in the short term but “should be a goal for Norway and other NATO members” (Arbeiderpartiet 2021).

While the overall effect of the agreement remains to be seen, the TPNW has the potential to effect change in multiple ways. First and most immediately, the positive obligations enshrined in the agreement, such as the duties to assist victims and provide environmental remediation, could yield help to affected communities. Further, the provisions for nuclear disarmament verification is already fostering innovative thinking among experts (see Patton, Philippe, and Mian 2019; Shea 2019). While nuclear disarmament verification work carried out under the auspices of certain nuclear-armed states has occasionally been tainted by the suspicion that the activities in question are being promoted primarily as a fig leaf for inaction (see Perkovich 2020, 18; Varriale 2020, 19–19), verification work carried out in support of the TPNW might steer clear of such suspicions.

Second, the TPNW and the norms it codifies could serve as the lynchpin of an alternative nuclear politics – a new nuclear “common sense” – that might over time nudge hearts and minds to financially and ideologically divesting from nuclear arms. In the words of the UN Secretary-General, the TPNW could provide a tool for generating “useful pressure for effective, positive measures in disarmament” (Guterres 2018). Nuclear policy pundits often take for granted that policy change will inevitably have to take place through persuasion – that those currently opposed to this or that disarmament measure will have to be brought over to the other side through polite, elite-level consultations and rational argumentation. But such “Habermasian” conversion is rare in real life – certainly among high-level politicians. As Max Planck put it with regards to scientific paradigm shifts, a new paradigm “does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it” (Planck 1950, 33–34). In the case of nuclear diplomacy, there is also the added complication that the key interlocutors – diplomats – act not as autonomous subjects but as representatives of complex organisations and vested interests. The TPNW, in this view, is unlikely to bring about change by altering the minds of current diplomats and politicians. But it might contribute to over time shaping wider narratives and understandings and, by extension, the worldviews of future politicians, strategists, voters, and activists. As discussed above, a key contribution of the TPNW is to create room for adversarial politics, democracy, and ethical clarity – to draw away the abolitionist “veil of good intentions” and reveal the fault lines underpinning the global nuclear order (see Ruzicka 2018).

Third, the TPNW could weigh in more directly in existing debates on nuclear policy as a rhetorical asset and source of pressure. An interesting case in point is Barack Obama’s deputy national security advisor, Ben Rhodes, who after leaving office praised the



International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), the civil society coalition championing the TPNW. Alluding that outside pressure plays a crucial role in shaping discussions inside governments, Rhodes argued in 2019 that it was important to hold nuclear-armed leaders’ “feet to the fire”. After all, states are not unitary actors of a single mind, but arenas for political contestation and discussion. In these tugs of war, opposing factions naturally use the rhetorical resources that are available to them, including external pressures and arguments. And the pressure from disarmers, Rhodes implied, was not nearly strong enough. As the former official argued,

the other side of these debates – the people who manufacture the weapons, the people who might want to use the weapons, the people who unfortunately are in power in too many places – they’re very well coordinated, they’re very well-funded, they share common strategies; we know that. And what they’re counting on is your apathy, your cynicism, your sense that there’s nothing I can do about this – that I can’t deal with the scale of change that needs to take place. Once you succumb to that, they win (Rhodes 2019).

Given the mighty opposition of the defence industry and other vested interests, it was crucial, Rhodes suggested, to amplify pressure for disarmament through “visionary organisations like ICAN”. While Rhodes might not have admitted it while in office, the endorsement by US allies and other non-nuclear-weapon states of the TPNW could help progressives within the US government make their case for American nuclear restraint, including a no-first-use or sole-purpose policy, by widening the so-called Overton window or perceived scope for political action. After all, at present, the case for a large US arsenal and first-use nuclear posture turns largely on the claim that America’s allies and partners would not have it any other way.

Ultimately, the impact of the TPNW will be determined by its stakeholders. For its supporters, the entry-into-force of the agreement is a beginning, not an end.

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