Article

Hierarchy, revisionism, and subordinate actors: The TPNW and the subversion of the nuclear order

Naomi Egel (iD)
Stanford University, USA

Steven Ward
University of Cambridge, UK

Abstract

Why and how do weak states challenge the status quo? This article builds on analyses of hierarchy in International Relations to develop a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of the concept of revisionism. We argue that while weak actors cannot generally directly challenge their position in a stratified hierarchy, they may be able to undermine or subvert the discourses that constitute these hierarchies. This approach is likely to be attractive and feasible under two conditions: when other approaches to reform have been frustrated, and when social and political resources are available to facilitate such subversive challenges. We illustrate this argument by analyzing the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons as a subversive revisionist project. Small states—frustrated by their inability to negotiate meaningful reform through the status quo framework—partnered with civil society and drew upon discursive resources developed during prior subversive revisionist projects in an effort to stigmatize nuclear weapons and subvert the discourses constituting the advantaged positions of those possessing them. While the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) is unlikely to directly persuade nuclear weapon states to abandon their arsenals, it could have unpredictable consequences across a related range of hierarchic fields that constitute the status quo order.

Corresponding author:
Steven Ward, Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Cambridge, Alison Richard Building, Cambridge CB3 9DT, UK.
Email: sw986@cam.ac.uk.

In 2017, 122 states passed a treaty prohibiting nuclear weapons. Missing from the negotiations were states that possessed nuclear weapons. The effort was led by small nonnuclear states with little leverage. Yet supporters and opponents highlight the revisionist nature of the initiative, describing the treaty as a fundamental challenge to the legitimacy of nuclear weapons and the system of deterrence (e.g. Acheson, 2018; Fabricius, 2017; Fihn, 2018; Ford, 2017).

Revisionism is a popular topic in International Relations (IR)—the question of why and how states grow dissatisfied and seek change is at the center of much prominent work in the field. However, these treatments typically focus on great powers or regional powers. Explaining revisionism usually involves identifying the factors that drive materially powerful states to expend resources on extra-security objectives. This is partly because conventional conceptions of revisionism are informed by broadly realist assumptions about the implications of anarchy, which suggest that significant challenges to the status quo can only be undertaken by states with substantial economic and military capabilities. From this perspective, the grievances of weaker actors merit little attention. Indeed, this is why the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) is puzzling. Surely the leaders and diplomatic representatives of the TPNW's proponents understand the futility of an effort to dramatically challenge the status quo from such disadvantaged positions. Why do they bother?

We argue that this view reflects an unnecessarily constrained conception of revisionism. Over the past decade, analytical frameworks that take hierarchy seriously have proliferated in IR. Because these approaches theorize order in ways that go beyond the distribution of material capabilities, they facilitate a broader understanding of revisionism. Frameworks rooted in hierarchy make it possible to theorize the assumptions, ideas, and discourses that form the basis of stratification. This exercise implies that revisionist projects can produce change in two ways: by challenging the stratification of states itself or by challenging the constitutive foundations of stratification. The former approach encompasses conventional understandings of revisionism and generally requires substantial material capabilities to succeed. The latter approach—which we label subversive revisionism—aims at a different target and requires different resources to be feasible. We argue that these challenges can be undertaken by a wider range of actors—including materially weak states. This is the sort of revisionist project, we argue, that the TPNW represents. Other examples of this type of revisionism include decolonization movements in the mid-20th century, the Cold War Non-Aligned Movement, and the New International Economic Order of the 1970s.

Prior work has depicted the TPNW (as we do) as a form of resistance by subordinate actors against a hegemonic nuclear order and as an effort to shift the normative value of nuclear possession (e.g. Ritchie, 2019; Ritchie and Egeland, 2018). Our contribution is to locate this effort within a broader theoretical and conceptual context and, by doing so, to simultaneously advance the field's understanding of the TPNW and of hierarchy and

revisionism. By developing a more flexible conception of revisionism and linking it explicitly to the rich literature on hierarchy in world politics, we offer a set of tools for understanding the emergence of the TPNW as a particular type of state-based effort to challenge the status quo. At the same time, we use the case of the TPNW to highlight and illustrate a form of revisionism that has received little attention in mainstream IR scholarship.

The next section lays out a theoretical framework for understanding different challenges to hierarchy. We develop the distinction between revisionist efforts aimed at stratification and those aimed at the discourses that produce stratification, and discuss the conditions facilitating each. The third section illustrates the framework by analyzing how nonnuclear weapons states have challenged the nuclear hierarchy. We argue that the TPNW represents a shift from an approach aimed at renegotiation to one aimed at subversion. We show that this shift resulted from frustration, combined with perceptions of opportunity rooted in the availability of particular social and political resources. The conclusion considers the potential consequences of the TPNW and explores the broader applicability and implications of the theory for understanding revisionism, hierarchy, and change in world politics.

Anarchy, hierarchy, and revisionism

Until recently, the discipline of IR was dominated by the assumption that international politics was an anarchic realm. This perspective pointed analysts interested in understanding how and why states might challenge the status quo toward a single variable: relative power (Waltz, 1979). In this view, anarchy privileges material power as both a central objective that states seek and the most important means by which they pursue change (e.g. Mearsheimer, 2001; Walt, 1987). Accordingly, the analysis of *revisionist* behavior in international politics—until recently primarily of interest to theorists refining realist models—was limited in scope.[1] Because significant expressions of dissatisfaction could only be undertaken by actors with the capacity to challenge the distribution of material capabilities, the possibility that less powerful states might undertake revisionist projects warranted little attention.

The anarchy problématique has been challenged recently by increasingly prominent work organized around the explicit analysis of hierarchy in international politics. This move encompasses a variety of scholarship that depicts IR as constituted by different forms of inequality. These approaches interrogate a broad array of structures of super- and subordination that constitute, constrain, socialize, and motivate actors. Analyses rooted in hierarchy have enriched understandings of the sources of order and disorder in world politics, and illuminated factors that drive and constrain foreign policy. We contend that taking hierarchy seriously also implies a more inclusive, nuanced, and useful conception of revisionism.

Hierarchy refers to "any system in which actors are organised into vertical relations of super- and subordination" (Zarakol, 2017: 1). This definition accommodates multiple conceptions of inequality and the logics that produce it. Zarakol (2017), for instance, distinguishes between narrow hierarchies as bargained arrangements establishing authority within the context of anarchy, and broader conceptions of hierarchy as

"deep structures of organised inequality that are neither designed nor particularly open to renegotiation" (p. 7). Bially Mattern and Zarakol (2016) similarly distinguish between three *logics* of hierarchy. The logic of tradeoffs (associated with the rationalist and institutionalist frameworks of authors like Lake and Ikenberry) explains super- and subordination as functions of the *incentives* facing different actors (Ikenberry, 2011; Lake, 2009). In this view, subordinate states accept constraints on freedom of action and sovereignty because superordinate states offer compensation in the form of wealth, stability, or security. The logic of positionality—visible in the literature on status in IR—explains super or subordination as functions of the positions that states occupy in vertically stratified social systems and the expectations and performances that derive from them (e.g. Barnhardt, 2016; Duque, 2018; Ward, 2017). The logic of productivity explains super- and subordination as functions of deeply instantiated knowledge structures, discourses, or a "practical or performative ontology of hierarchies" that "simultaneously produce distinctive political spaces and the varied actors and actions that populate and enact them" (Bially Mattern and Zarakol, 2016: 634).

We harness these distinctions to theorize the implications of the hierarchy turn for understanding revisionism. Hierarchies stratify actors in multiple, mutually reinforcing ways. Figure 1 depicts a hierarchical system encompassing multiple social "fields" within which actors are stratified. Nexon and Neumann—translating Bourdieusean concepts into the realm of IR—define fields as "delimited spheres of social action" that "entail specific 'rules of the game' that shape how actors relate to one another as they jockey for power, status, and influence." Fields are distinct domains of competition; have distinct rules governing the apportionment of status, prestige, and influence; and are structured by different ideas about what characteristics or performances yield capital (Nexon and Neumann, 2018: 667). In the context of international politics, this means that hierarchies exist within multiple social fields: there might be an international economic field, a military field, and a science and technology field, among others (Musgrave and Nexon, 2018). Figure 1 captures this diversity by depicting three generic fields alongside one another.

Within each field, hierarchies are constituted through multiple processes that influence and reproduce one another. To theorize these processes, we adapt Bially Mattern and Zarakol's distinction between contractual, positional, and productive hierarchical logics. At the most superficial level, hierarchy within a particular field involves an unequal distribution of rights and privileges. This occurs any time one actor grants another a privilege not enjoyed universally. The notion that "great powers" have exclusive "spheres of influence" within which they can exercise power unilaterally is an example of such an institutionalized privilege (Ward, 2020). Another involves the apportionment of voting rights within international institutions (like the International Monetary Fund (IMF)) that reflect the distribution of capital in the relevant field. A third example is the notion that the legitimate possession of some weapons is restricted to certain actors. These arrangements are sometimes enshrined in international treaties and legal documents, but this is not necessary. In Figure 1, these "contractual" elements of hierarchy are depicted as triangles at the top of each field.

Hierarchy is also constituted by differences in how actors rank along consensually valued dimensions of comparison. The focus here is on how different characteristics or
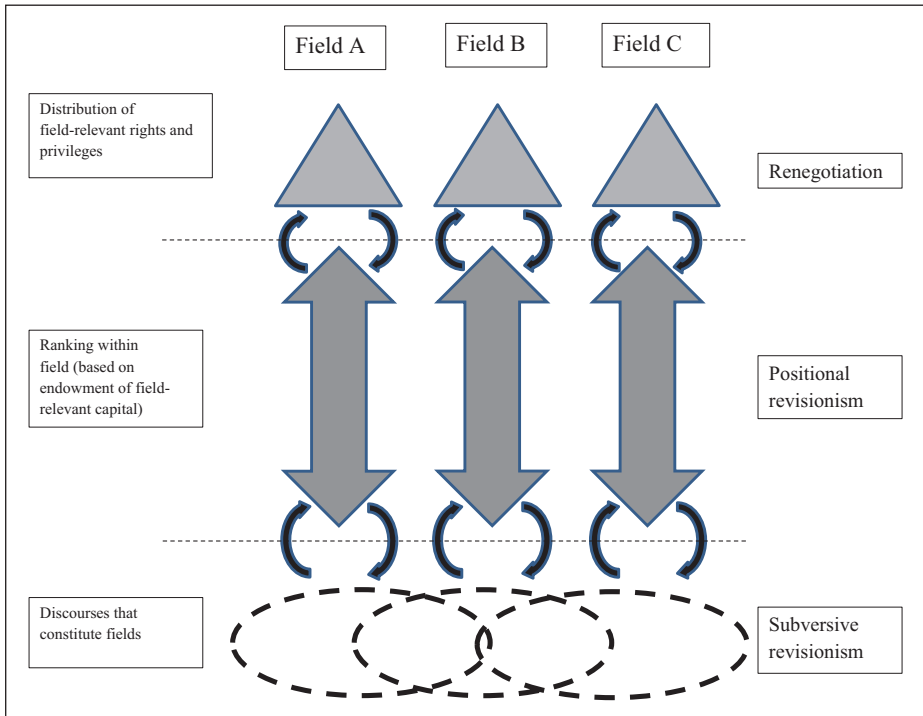
Figure 1. Modes of challenging hierarchies.

endowments stratify actors to produce differences in status and influence (Gilady, 2017; Musgrave and Nexon, 2018; Ward, 2017). "Great powers," for instance, are states that possess sufficiently large amounts of material power (stemming from wealth, population, or territory) and certain kinds of capabilities—in particular, to project significant military force abroad (Levy, 1983: 10–19). In sum, differences in rankings along significant dimensions of comparison contribute to differences in how actors' positions within an international hierarchy are imagined and described. These differences are, in turn, reflected in the bargained hierarchical arrangements described above: "great powers" demand and are accorded particular privileges in part because of role expectations that stem from these positional understandings. The positional element of hierarchy appears in Figure 1 as double-headed arrows. Within each field, positional and contractual facets of hierarchy co-constitute one another—field-specific rankings structure distributions of rights and privileges, which in turn provide concrete evidence about which actors hold what rank.

The third element in our framework encompasses the discourses, ontologies, and ideologies that, in Bially Mattern and Zarakol's (2016) words, "produce distinctive political spaces and the varied actors and actions that populate and enact them" (p. 634). Hierarchies are constituted not only (or even most importantly) by sets of negotiated rights and privileges or by positional stratifications, but also by shared ideas and

discourses that establish what is valuable or significant as bases for stratification. These constitute, for instance, the background knowledge against which claims to and assessments of "great power" status are made and negotiated. These standards are not immutable and may be manipulable, as analyses of "social creativity" suggest (Larson and Shevchenko, 2010).

The discourses that produce hierarchies are multiple and overlapping. Fields are often structured by multiple discourses, and discourses may be implicated in multiple fields. Thus, hierarchies across different fields may be interdependent. For example, "great power" is a stratified role within a particularly significant field, akin to what Nexon and Neumann (2018: 673) call a "generalized status" field. Great power status is produced by multiple, overlapping discourses. Assessments of who counts as a legitimate great power depend on discourses about the value of various military practices and technologies, as well as discourses about *responsibility*. Great powers are not only states able to project force with arsenals of symbolically significant weapons; they also have a responsibility to promote order around the world in ways consistent with behavioral standards that have evolved over time (Bernstein, 2020; Suzuki, 2008). Simultaneously, ideas about what makes a state a great power are influenced by the attributes and behavior of states that are, in practice, understood and treated as such. Separate hierarchical fields are thus connected through underlying discourses. In Figure 1, the productive facet of hierarchy is depicted as a series of overlapping, permeable ovals beneath the positional level.

Positional and subversive revisionist challenges to hierarchy

This theoretical framework illuminates the overlapping obstacles facing subordinate actors dissatisfied with the status quo and points toward distinct approaches to challenging hierarchies. Our framework is agnostic about the sources of dissatisfaction. An actor might be dissatisfied with a particular distribution of privileges for reasons related to wealth, status, moral beliefs and values, or security concerns. For instance, a subordinate actor in an unequal alliance arrangement might seek to renegotiate terms for various reasons, including dissatisfaction with economic burden sharing, concerns about the credibility of the patron's security guarantees, or dissatisfaction arising from domestic opposition.

Our focus is not on the origins of dissatisfaction but on how subordinate actors seek to redress it. One option is to persuade the superordinate actor to renegotiate the arrangement. We do not consider this to be a form of revisionism: renegotiation is superficial and common—it does not aim at deep change, and "normal politics" regularly involves some form of bargaining over the distribution of privileges related to different issues. When weaker states can renegotiate the contractual element of a hierarchy, deeper revisionism is not necessary.

However, renegotiation is sometimes impossible. One obstacle is that the contractual element of hierarchy is influenced by the relative distribution of field-relevant capital. Unless a subordinate actor has developed additional leverage since the initial arrangement was negotiated, the superordinate actor is unlikely to accommodate a demand for change. This implies that the subordinate actor might need to advance along the relevant

dimension of comparison to increase leverage. But this is costly and might also be risky, as it may generate resistance from other actors.

A further obstacle may arise if the privilege at issue is implicated in the discourses and practices that constitute the hierarchy. Superordinate actors may then be particularly hesitant to renegotiate its distribution, as doing so would weaken or eliminate one of the bases of their own advantaged position. One historical example of this dynamic involved the conflict over race-based immigration discrimination during the early 20th century. Japanese foreign policy during this period sought to negotiate fair treatment of Japanese citizens in Western countries on an equal basis with the citizens of predominantly White countries. Western great powers resisted, in part because the claim challenged the principle of White supremacy, which constituted both domestic and international hierarchies (Ward, 2013).

What options do dissatisfied subordinate states have when renegotiation is impossible? The framework sketched above points toward two general types of revisionist approaches, which target different elements of hierarchical fields. One approach aims at the distribution of field-relevant capital. These projects target the "positional" level—they develop leverage by advancing along relevant dimensions of comparison, then use that leverage to secure concessions from superordinate actors. Conventional understandings of revisionism as efforts to improve military capacity fit within this category. So do what others have called "distributive" forms of revisionism (Cooley et al., 2019; Ward, 2017). Broadly, positional or distributive revisionism transforms material resources into field-relevant capital, thereby advancing the state's position in the hierarchy.

The second approach to challenging a hierarchy is to undermine its productive foundations. The target of what we call "subversive" revisionist projects is not positional stratification or the distribution of rights and privileges but the set of ideas and discourses that constitute the hierarchy. This approach aims to erode and replace accepted notions about the characteristics, performances, and practices that confer position and privileges. Rather than an effort to convert material power into field-relevant capital, subversive revisionism might appear as an organized rhetorical effort to stigmatize a widely accepted status symbol; as a withdrawal from a central institution or organization that embodies norms, ideas, or ideologies that constitute hierarchy; or as an attempt to create alternative institutions aimed at eroding the legitimacy of status quo institutions. This approximates He et al.'s concept of "soft revisionism," which refers to the use of "non-military means to undermine the dominant power's legitimacy" (He et al., 2021: 10). Getachew's (2019) depiction of decolonization efforts in the 1950s and 1960s is also consistent with this approach: "empire was a form of domination that exceeded the bilateral relations of colonizer and colonized. As a result, it required a similarly global anticolonial counterpoint that would undo the hierarchies that facilitated domination" (p. 2). Promoting discourses about the normative value of self-determination constituted a subversive revisionist challenge in that it aimed to "transform conditions of international hierarchy that facilitated dependence and domination" (Getachew, 2019: 4–5).

Positional and subversive revisionism are likely to seem attractive to actors facing different constraints. Positional revisionism poses a less foundational challenge to the advantaged positions of superordinate actors and may thus seem more feasible to subordinate actors, all else equal. This is because positional revisionism does not necessarily

undermine the constitution of the hierarchy itself. Depending on the nature of the challenge, superordinate actors could plausibly satisfy a revisionist simply by elevating them to a higher position (and acceding to demands for concomitant privileges). For example, the United States and others have effectively "promoted" India to the status of a nuclear weapon state by waiving restrictions on nuclear exports and legitimizing India's possession of nuclear weapons (Smetana, 2020). Superordinate actors can retain their own advantaged positions—though perhaps diluted by the expansion of the elite club—and the ideational and discursive bases of those advantages remain unthreatened.

By contrast, subversive revisionism aims to erode or replace the discourses that produce a field. This may have more far-reaching consequences, both vertically and horizontally (relative to the diagram in Figure 1), than an effort to improve the position of a single state. Subversive challenges universally call into question the positions, rights, and privileges of superordinate actors within the targeted field. These processes can facilitate similar challenges in other hierarchies whose positional or contractual elements are partially produced by the discourse(s) being challenged. All else equal, positional revisionist challenges may thus be less comprehensively threatening, more easily accommodated, and more likely to succeed than subversive challenges.

Positional revisionism, however, is not always feasible. The most obvious constraint involves the ability to transform wealth and resources into field-relevant capital. Those best positioned to pursue positional revisionism will be actors with the unrealized potential to improve their recognized position in a hierarchy by transforming material power into "currency" within salient fields of competition (Musgrave and Nexon, 2018; Nexon and Neumann, 2018). These actors—middle powers and aspiring great powers—have been the focus of orthodox treatments of revisionism that explain why and how relatively well-endowed actors embark on projects aimed at, for instance, translating potential power into military power or using military power to demonstrate their worthiness for inclusion in elite status clubs that enjoy privileges (Davidson, 2006; Schweller, 1994; Ward, 2017).

Yet the vast majority of subordinate actors lack the material resources to mount such challenges. These actors may, at times, attempt to use what leverage they have to persuade superordinate actors to renegotiate elements of hierarchical arrangements. However, these efforts face obvious obstacles due to the power and status disparities inherent in hierarchies. Smaller states will often lack the ability to embark on plausible efforts to advance their status and influence enough to substantially reduce these disparities.

Other dynamics may also obstruct the pursuit of positional revisionism. Actors may be constrained not by material weakness but, for instance, by domestic-level normative or identity-related restrictions on the development of various kinds of field-relevant capital. For example, American territorial expansion in the 19th and early 20th centuries was obstructed at times by both principled anti-imperialism and racially inflected ideas about American national identity (Maass, 2020). Contemporary German foreign policy continues to be constrained by domestic norms favoring anti-militarism (Berger, 1997, 2002; Crawford and Olsen, 2017). Thus, positional revisionism may be difficult or unattractive, even when the development of field-relevant capital is technically possible.

When actors facing these kinds of material or non-material obstacles to the pursuit of positional revisionism still harbor ambitions to challenge a hierarchical arrangement, the only other option is subversion. Of course, subversive revisionism is not guaranteed to succeed. For one thing, it brings no direct coercive leverage to bear against a superordinate actor. Subversive revisionist projects are diffuse and indirect, gambling that over the long-run ideas and discourses that constitute more concrete advantages can be undermined. These efforts require coordination among like-minded actors. Attempts to stigmatize or delegitimize particular practices or attributes are unlikely to succeed unless articulated by many voices (Bower, 2017: 2). Similarly, the withdrawal of a single member from an institution central to hierarchy would likely only stigmatize and alienate that actor rather than undermine the institution. Thus, unlike positional revisionist efforts, subversion requires coordination by many actors.

Subversive revisionism may also be costly. Superordinate actors often have the capacity to punish or coerce dissidents. In extreme cases, withdrawing from an institution or vocally objecting to a dominant discourse might result in isolation and designation as a rogue or pariah. Even in less extreme cases, subversion can be silenced or hampered by superordinate actors' ability to manipulate the incentive structures facing prospective participants in revisionist projects.

In sum, while subversive revisionism may be feasible when positional revisionism is not, the obstacles are still high. Explaining when and how these kinds of projects emerge requires understanding what affects their perceived attractiveness.

Conditions favoring subversive challenges

We argue that two factors in combination are necessary for actors to launch serious subversive challenges. The first is frustration with less radical approaches. Because both positional and subversive revisionism face high obstacles to success and may be quite costly, dissatisfied actors are likely to first try renegotiating the "contractual" element of the hierarchy at issue. Although success may seem unlikely, the costs and risks of attempting renegotiation first are low compared with either form of revisionism.

The apparent closure of this pathway may increase the attractiveness of subversive revisionism for two reasons. First, subversion may be the only option remaining. If superordinate actors seem immovably opposed to renegotiation and positional revisionism seems implausible, seeking change by undermining the discursive foundations of hierarchy may be all that is left. Second, subversion may be attractive because it rejects the legitimacy of hierarchical arrangements in ways that positional revisionism does not. While advancing along consensually valued dimensions of comparison in order to establish greater leverage may enable an actor to secure acquiescence to a demand, it endorses and reproduces those same dimensions of comparison as legitimately constitutive of stratification (Pouliot, 2016). Subversive revisionism, by contrast, explicitly rejects the principles on which stratification is founded. While this may not produce immediate concrete results, it does allow subordinate actors to vent frustration and anger, avoid appearing to meekly accept their station, and exercise greater agency. Thus, it can be attractive for both social psychological and political reasons—especially if alternative approaches seem futile (Evers, 2017; Ward, 2017, 2019).

Explaining the emergence of frustration is difficult, but a number of factors might contribute to perceptions that alternatives to subversion face insurmountable obstacles. We highlight two of these. First, repeated failure to make even marginal progress toward negotiating a change in the status quo may, over time, contribute to the perception that institutions and mechanisms intended to facilitate bargaining are inadequate (and potentially even counterproductive). Second, a variety of different kinds of changes in context might influence actors' expectations about the prospect of successful renegotiation. For instance, structural conditions might change, leading to expected changes in incentives or constraints. Alternatively, changes in leadership might produce anticipated changes in the preferences of one's negotiating partner.

Changing conditions can produce pessimism about the prospect of negotiating a change in the status quo in two ways. First, conditions might change in ways that *directly* raise obstacles—for instance, by reducing the apparent incentives of a negotiating partner to make concessions. Second, conditions might change in ways that seem to *reduce* obstacles to progress. This might first produce heightened expectations and increase optimism. But if progress stalls, the indirect result might be even greater pessimism as actors conclude that obstacles run deeper than incentives, constraints, or the preferences of individual leaders. Psychologists suggest that this phenomenon of dashed hopes is more disturbing than an expected negative outcome, and produces behavioral changes aimed at avoiding future disappointments (e.g. van Dijk et al., 2003; Zeelenberg et al., 2000).

In addition to growing frustration, the other condition that influences the attractiveness of subversion is variation in perceptions of the possibility of successfully challenging the hierarchy's constitutive discourses. Subversive revisionist projects depend less on material power and more on the availability of political and social resources that facilitate the production and dissemination of challenges to hegemonic discourses and which help entrepreneurs convince potential partners to join a subversive effort. One key to understanding the development of these resources is the overlapping character of the discourses that constitute different fields. If a set of discourses is productive of hierarchy in multiple fields, then prior challenges to these (perhaps aimed at other substantive issues) may facilitate future subversive projects. Scholars of norm development, for instance, emphasize that the successful development of new norms often requires "grafting" these onto existing and broader "metanorms" (e.g. Price, 1998). Thus, delegitimizing one class of weapon (for example) as contrary to humanitarian principles may make it easier to craft arguments aimed at other classes of weapons (or at overlapping discourses regarding "responsibility").

Prior subversive challenges may also facilitate future subversive revisionist efforts in other ways. The mere availability of examples of similar, recently successful efforts can aid future efforts. When subordinate actors can point to successes in the recent past, it should increase their assessments of the prospects for future similar efforts and their ability to mobilize potential partners. Scholarship on democratization, for example, points to diffusion, "cascades," or "contagion" via demonstration as a mechanism for change (e.g. Weyland, 2019). Moreover, these kinds of projects may produce political and institutional infrastructure that facilitates future subversive revisionist challenges. This might include civil society organizations that foster the development of alternative discourses

and ideas; formal or informal institutions or transnational networks that promote connections between likeminded state and nonstate actors; or other venues, organizations, and relationships that give subordinate actors the space and capacity to produce and circulate ideas and narratives that challenge the discursive foundations of a system's stratification (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Petrova, 2018).

Because subversive revisionism is less likely than positional revisionism to produce direct, immediate change, does not center around the mobilization of material resources, and is unlikely to produce military conflict, a critic might reasonably object that subversion does not matter much for understanding world politics. The discussion above suggests that this view is misguided. Even when a subversive project fails to achieve its immediate objectives, it can still have profound (if indirect) consequences. Because different hierarchic fields are linked to one another through the discourses that co-produce them, subversive revisionist projects that fail in their ultimate aims may still weaken or challenge discourses that constitute and structure hierarchies in *different* fields. Thus, the dynamics of even *un*successful subversive revisionist projects merit attention, both because they can encourage future challenges that may succeed and because they may have secondary consequences for related fields.

The TPNW as a subversive revisionist project

To illustrate these dynamics, we analyze a "pathway" (or typical) case: the process leading to the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Pathway cases are useful for demonstrating and exploring newly developed theories. An appropriate pathway case "conforms to or typifies a causal relationship of interest" (Gerring and Cojucaru, 2016: 405). The analysis aims to establish the plausibility of a theoretical framework by exploring the operation of its causal mechanisms. The TPNW is a useful pathway case primarily because it is a clear example of a project undertaken by relatively weak actors (many lacking the material capacity to pursue positional revisionism) aimed at challenging the discursive foundation of one element of international hierarchy. Exploring the conditions that made the TPNW attractive to its proponents and the way they pursued it provides an opportunity to establish the plausibility of our broader theoretical claims about the origins of subversive revisionism.

The case is also substantively important beyond concerns about research design. Nuclear weapons are symbolically implicated in several different international hierarchic arrangements that cross multiple fields. The five nuclear weapon states recognized in the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) are also the five permanent members of the Security Council—meaning that the distribution of privileges within the nuclear hierarchy helps produce the more generalized hierarchy inscribed in the status distinctions central to the Security Council. Discourses about the legitimacy and value of nuclear weapons also help constitute broader security hierarchies by endowing nuclear weapons states with unique capabilities and responsibilities for providing security (Ruzicka, 2018). These distinctions help form the foundation for the unequal security bargains enshrined in, for instance, the relationships between the United States and its allies in Europe and East Asia. Both nonnuclear weapons states' commitment to nonproliferation under the NPT and US allies' implicit commitment to nonproliferation

in exchange for coverage under the US nuclear umbrella reflect the notion that nuclear weapon possession is an exclusive privilege. Thus, challenges to the discourses that establish nuclear weapons as potent status symbols and instruments of deterrence may plausibly profoundly influence relations within other fields.

Much scholarship characterizes the nuclear order as hierarchical (Considine, 2019; Egeland, 2017, 2018, 2021; Ruzicka, 2018; Thakur, 2018), and some have described the TPNW as an example of resistance to this hierarchy (Ritchie, 2019; Ritchie and Egeland, 2018). Resistance, however, is endemic to the daily bargaining of IR, including diplomatic relations. In contrast, (subversive) revisionism is a higher bar: it is a direct attempt to undermine the foundations of a given field or order and the hierarchy embedded in it. Thus, while the TPNW may be an example of both resistance and revisionism, the depth and scope of this challenge (including what makes it different from previous efforts to get rid of nuclear weapons) are not fully captured by accounts of the TPNW as simply resistance. We build on earlier analyses but refine them by characterizing the TPNW as an instance of subversive revisionism: a direct attempt to undermine the discursive foundations of a hierarchy.

The rest of this section thus illustrates the dynamics of a generalizable theoretical explanation that helps account for the emergence of the TPNW but may also be applied to understand different forms of revisionism across different fields. We show that the shift toward subversive revisionism reflected in the TPNW project originated in growing frustration among nonnuclear states with the long attempt to renegotiate the terms of the nuclear order and that it was facilitated by the development of political and social resources during previous initiatives to delegitimize other weapons. We then examine the potential challenges that the TPNW poses for dominant actors. Our analysis draws on reporting and secondary accounts of negotiations over nuclear disarmament, as well as firsthand interviews with diplomats, members of civil society, and bureaucrats.[2]

The nuclear hierarchy

A distinct set of hierarchical arrangements structures interstate relations with regard to nuclear weapons. Stratification in this field reflects discourses about which actors can legitimately possess nuclear weapons, as well as the material and symbolic value of that technology; stratification is also reflected in an unequal distribution of privileges related to nuclear weapons (Ruzicka, 2018: 380–381; Ritchie, 2019). The hierarchy is visible in the NPT. The treaty—primarily created by the United States and the Soviet Union—established a legal distinction between the five states that had developed nuclear weapons before 1967 (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and all others. It creates separate rules, duties, and privileges for these five states, resulting in an inherently unequal order:

> It asked states to accept the drawing of a line between those that could and could not possess and use nuclear weapons, accept that legal rights and obligations would differ substantially on either side of the line, and thereby tolerate an institutionalized injustice. (Walker, 2012: 5)

The nuclear hierarchy is maintained not only through formal institutions but also through rules, practices, and discourse around nuclear weapons. Describing the "nuclear ideology" and discourse underpinning nuclear hierarchy, Egeland (2021) notes that:

> while the ideology frames the abolition of nuclear weapons as a long-term "vision," it simultaneously portrays the practice of nuclear deterrence by "responsible" major powers as legitimate and necessary for stability and order in the short term, thus undermining the cause of disarmament. (p. 2)

The nuclear hierarchy rests on a discursive foundation legitimating the continued possession of nuclear weapons by the P5. This discourse contributes to other hierarchical arrangements in IR. The legitimate possession of nuclear weapons by the P5 bolsters their privileged positions at the UN Security Council, affords them significant prestige in international politics (O'Neill, 2006), and advantages them in both nuclear and nonnuclear institutions. This status quo is naturalized to the extent that the P5's possession of nuclear weapons has been normalized in IR (Hanson, 2018: 465–467). At the same time, the nuclear hierarchy has obvious material implications: the existence of nuclear weapons makes nonnuclear weapon states vulnerable to coercion and nuclear devastation (Egel, 2022).

Concerns about these consequences have motivated efforts to prevent the use of nuclear weapons for nearly as long as nuclear weapons have existed. But this multifaceted and long-standing dissatisfaction with the nuclear hierarchy has only recently been expressed as an effort to delegitimize nuclear *possession*. Prior to 2010, efforts to revise the nuclear hierarchy were limited in scope. For most nonnuclear states, positional revisionism (i.e. acquiring nuclear weapons themselves) was unavailable for multiple reasons, including material limitations as well as (more importantly, in many cases) widespread normative aversion, combined with legal commitments to refrain from doing so. Moreover, attempts to bring about disarmament historically involved negotiating with and securing the consent of those at the top of the hierarchy, as opposed to undermining the discursive foundation of the hierarchy.[3] While achieving this long-term objective would dismantle the nuclear hierarchy, the means employed aimed at reform through renegotiation.

The TPNW departed significantly from this process of renegotiation within the nuclear hierarchy. It constituted a direct challenge to the authority and legitimacy of the most powerful nuclear states, as opposed to an effort to convince them to surrender their privileged positions of their own accord.[4] This shift toward a subversive revisionist approach involved three key elements. First nonnuclear weapon states rejected status quo institutions, instead going outside them to pursue change.[5] Second, nonnuclear weapon states no longer sought to win the support of nuclear weapon states, indicating that the TPNW cannot be read as an effort to renegotiate the status quo distribution of privileges. Third, the TPNW aims to delegitimize the dominant discourse around nuclear weapons as instruments of deterrence and security rather than to win greater privileges within the existing hierarchy for a wider array of states.

Sources of frustration

The nuclear ban movement grew out of nonnuclear weapon states' frustration with the slow pace of disarmament by nuclear weapon states. Although the United States and Russia substantially reduced their nuclear arsenals after the Cold War ended, they also modernized them. This indicated a continued commitment to maintaining the essence of the nuclear hierarchy. Moreover, most nuclear-related agreements and initiatives—including UN Security Council Resolution 1540 and the Nuclear Security Summits—were aimed at nonproliferation, not disarmament. The result was a perception among nonnuclear weapon states that they were asked to accept an increasing number of non-proliferation obligations and restrictions while nuclear weapon states stalled progress on disarmament. In the wake of the 2005 NPT review conference's failure to produce an agreement, nonnuclear weapon states (spurred on by civil society) began to search for new ways to overcome the stalemate (Gibbons, 2018: 15)

Nonnuclear weapon states had long sought disarmament through negotiations within existing institutions. Operating on the assumption that nuclear weapon states' participation was required for progress on this issue, nonnuclear weapon states proposed a bevy of reform initiatives aimed at spurring nuclear weapon states to agree to action advancing the goal of disarmament (Gibbons, 2018: 14). For example, negotiations in the mid-1990s over the permanent extension of the NPT also advanced weaker actors' goals of a strengthened review process (enabling them to play a greater role in the future of the NPT). In the 2000, 2005, and 2010 review conferences, they attempted to use this strengthened review process to negotiate greater disarmament commitments by the P5, with limited success. This satisfied nonnuclear weapon states for a period. The 2010 NPT review conference, in particular, seemed to offer new hope for progress, as states parties agreed on an outcome document including 22 actions related to nuclear disarmament and an explicit recognition of the humanitarian effects of nuclear weapons. However, states parties failed to reach agreement at subsequent preparatory meetings and at the 2015 review conference.

The end of the Cold War had ushered in new hopes that structural obstacles to disarmament would be diminished. During the 2000s, actions and statements from the United States further raised expectations. Particularly significant was President Obama's Prague Speech, which aspired to a world free of nuclear weapons (Gibbons, 2018: 14; Ruzicka, 2019: 392). In addition, a 2007 op-ed in the *New York Times* from four former US senior officials warned of the dangers threatened by nuclear weapons and called for progress toward disarmament. These messages raised nonnuclear weapons states' hopes (Interview 15, 12 May 2021; Interview 16, 29 November 2019). During the 2010s, however, these hopes were dashed. The aspirations of the two previous decades increasingly turned into deep disappointment and disillusionment with the status quo (Interview 15, 12 May 2021; Interview 16, 29 November 2019).

Initiatives from nonnuclear weapon states attempting to stimulate disarmament from within the NPT context also failed to yield dividends. As a Costa Rican diplomat later described the situation:

the predictability of the nuclear powers' political agenda and the neutered mediocrity of the 2015 NPT draft outcome document stood in stark contrast to the desires of the vocal, non-nuclear armed majority, who have had enough of nuclear powers' status quo grandstanding. (Chan, 2016: 408)

The failure to reach agreement at the 2015 NPT review conference crystallized perceptions among nonnuclear weapon states that progress on disarmament remained blocked and that status quo institutions could not accommodate their demands. According to one longtime NPT observer, "it was clear to most delegates that little further progress on disarmament language could be accomplished in the formal negotiating forums at the Rev[iew] Con[ference] for issues related to nuclear disarmament" (Potter, 2017: 85). The consensus-based nature of both the Conference on Disarmament and the NPT effectively held nonnuclear weapon states hostage to nuclear weapon states' reticence on disarmament, reproducing hierarchy rather than reforming it (Williams, 2018). Frustrated by the failures of existing fora, nonnuclear weapon states began to look for outside options.

Social and political resources

As frustration mounted, civil society activists renewed an effort to stigmatize nuclear weapons by focusing attention on their humanitarian consequences. Small states and their civil society allies contrasted the status quo stalemate on nuclear weapons with efforts related to landmines and cluster munitions, where successful bans had emerged over the objections of great powers. According to one diplomat, "the [1997] Mine Ban Treaty [was] a revolution in weapons treaty law. We have it and the nuclear ban treaty because of states' frustration with how the classic [disarmament] machinery works." (Interview 11, 20 March 2020). Nonnuclear weapon states emphasized these previous subversive efforts because they had successfully stigmatized other weapons. In drawing parallels between efforts to ban nuclear weapons and efforts to ban cluster munitions, one diplomat argued, "no civilized state would use cluster munitions today, whether they've signed on or not. Once you have a critical mass, some of these treaties take on a normative character, so you have to do less active convincing" (Interview 09, 18 February 2020). The availability of a recent instance in which a category of weapon had been successfully stigmatized allowed actors to imagine an effort to do the same for nuclear weapons.[6] While there had been previous efforts to stigmatize nuclear weapons—including social movements in the United States and Europe in the 1980s and state-led nuclear weapon free zones—TPNW proponents emphasized the landmines and cluster munitions examples because they viewed them as particularly successful initiatives on a global scale and as unencumbered by the legacy of the Cold War (Interview 12, 10 March 2020; Interview 14, 12 May 2021). Moreover, nuclear weapon free zones had not directly challenged the nuclear hierarchy, as they aimed at nonproliferation rather than disarmament.[7]

These previous efforts to ban landmines and cluster munitions contributed to the availability of political and social infrastructure that enabled a subversive challenge to the nuclear hierarchy. One TPNW participant recalled how "we had in 2011 the first strategy meeting between a group of NGOs and diplomats that were kind of involved in

the cluster munitions process to talk about banning nuclear weapons" (Interview 13, 20 March 2020). The landmine and cluster munition movements also contributed to the production of discursive resources that facilitated the challenge to the nuclear hierarchy. Nonnuclear weapon states and the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) started emphasizing the humanitarian devastation and suffering nuclear weapons caused when they were used. This was "an intentional framing with a connection to landmines and cluster munitions" that strategically "linked it [the effort to ban nuclear weapons] to other disarmament agreements" that had banned landmines and cluster munitions over the objections of great powers (Interview 07, 4 December 2019; Interview 03, 19 November 2019). This "framing create[d] associations and expectations among those involved in the previous processes" (Interview 03, 19 November 2019).

Landmines and cluster munitions were far less central to maintaining international hierarchy than nuclear weapons (perhaps explaining the positive outcomes of these efforts). Still, these campaigns offered successful models of similar weapon ban projects: this was a "paradigm that led to success in other fields" (Interview 08, 22 January 2020). This increased the expectation of small states and civil society that a nuclear ban might be plausible. Moreover, these prior efforts had helped produce discursive resources that actors would later harness to undermine the notion that nuclear weapons promoted international security.[8] Although the vocabulary of humanitarian concern over the destructive effects of weapons existed already, the efforts to ban landmines and cluster munitions appeared to demonstrate its potency. Frustrated nonnuclear weapon states and their civil society allies then invoked and translated this discourse into the domain of nuclear weapons.

The shift to subversive revisionism

Small states' frustration with failed reform efforts, combined with the availability of social and political resources facilitating challenges to the productive foundations of the nuclear hierarchy, prompted the shift toward subversive revisionism that culminated in the TPNW. This effort began to take shape in 2013 when Norway organized a conference on the humanitarian effects of nuclear weapons. Although the P5 boycotted this conference, 127 other states attended. That the conference was organized outside of the UN framework and that the P5 were absent both indicated that this represented the beginning of a new kind of challenge to the status quo—even though it was publicly presented as a fact-finding conference. As the Norwegian state secretary observed during the conference, "Well they've been very angry, the P5, they came and they démarched us, and said, 'this is a distraction' [. . .] Well, you know, their arguments weren't very convincing" (Fihn, 2018). The director of ICAN later recalled that

> the whole audience laughed, and it was the first time we laughed at the P5. And you know right there it just clicked, like oh my god, this is all about changing power dynamics, and this is all about controlling the narrative, and we're doing something and they're on the outside. (Fihn, 2018)

The Norwegian conference was followed by a Mexican-hosted conference in 2014 (also boycotted by the P5), which the chair described as "a point of no return" (Government of Mexico, 2014). Austria then hosted a conference in December 2014 that produced a Humanitarian Pledge emphasizing the threat of nuclear weapons to humanity globally and rejecting the notion that there could be any legitimate use of nuclear weapons. The Humanitarian Pledge was signed by 127 states.

Together, these conferences harnessed and further advanced discursive and symbolic resources that enabled a challenge to the hegemonic ideas that produced the P5's privileged position in the nuclear hierarchy. They provided a common language (the humanitarian frame) to justify the urgent need for sweeping change and they channeled nonnuclear weapon states' dissatisfaction with the nuclear hierarchy into a movement that pushed for a concrete outcome—a treaty banning nuclear weapons. One diplomat reflected that the 2014 Mexico conference galvanized a large coalition into becoming ready to take a new approach to prohibit nuclear weapons: there was "a willingness to not just recognize the effects of nuclear weapons [. . .] but a willingness to develop [new] legal norms in line with these effects" (Interview 10, 27 February 2020). Importantly, TPNW supporters saw the effort as a challenge to international hierarchy. They bemoaned "the unilateral imposition of great power politics" (Interview 10, 27 February 2020) and underscored the importance of nuclear weapons as "the ultimate power symbol" and "a very fundamental part of the international system (Interview 13, 20 March 2020). The TPNW constituted an attempt to rally "the rest of the world to create a revolution against it" (Interview 13, 20 March 2020).

In 2016, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution endorsing the Humanitarian Pledge and declaring that states would convene a conference in 2017 to negotiate "a legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons, leading towards their total elimination" (United Nations General Assembly, 2016). France, Russia, Israel, the United Kingdom, and the United States voted against the resolution, while China, India, and Pakistan abstained.[9] From the start, the TPNW's advocates were explicit that great power participation was not necessary. Instead, the decision to begin formal negotiations was taken at the UN General Assembly—a forum in which all states' votes are equal. The TPNW negotiating conference was attended by 124 states—none of which possessed nuclear weapons. The treaty entered into force on 22 January 2021.

The treaty requires nonnuclear weapon states to make few changes to their current behavior. For nuclear weapon states to join, however, they must eliminate their nuclear arsenals. The treaty is light on technical details related to the elimination of nuclear weapons. It focuses instead on stigmatization.[10] Proponents argued that the treaty "makes nuclear weapons illegal and it contributes to their stigmatization," that it "provided a long term perspective—which is important because banning nuclear weapons is a long-term process—because [the TPNW] was legally binding and can't be easily undone," and that "there was never any naïve belief that they would convince nuclear weapon states with the TPNW. What the treaty would contribute to is creating a norm" (Interview 11, 10 March 2020; Interview 03, 19 November 2019; Interview 08, 22 January 2020). The aim, in other words, is to subvert prevailing norms that produce nuclear hierarchy. As one activist argued,

given the vested interests of a few powerful countries in [favor] of retaining nuclear weapons, a key goal of those pursuing the Treaty was to delegitimize and stigmatize these weapons. Making them illegal, for everyone, is a key part of this process. (Acheson, 2018: 243).

Rather than attempt to negotiate disarmament, the TPNW targets the discursive production of nuclear weapons as legitimate implements of security and markers of status.

That the TPNW's objective is to subvert the nuclear hierarchy is further evidenced by its proponents' primary focus on states whose possession of nuclear weapons is considered legitimate within the order. Rather than focusing on states with nuclear weapons outside the NPT (Israel, India, Pakistan, and North Korea), treaty advocates decried the possession of nuclear weapons by the P5 (Interview 07, 4 December 2019). The TPNW attempts to turn attributes of status, prestige, and dominance into symbols of inferiority and shame. This did not go unnoticed by officials in these countries. In 2018, then-US Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Ford (2018) argued that the TPNW

encourages a pernicious false equivalency between some states with nuclear weapons that seek to upend the global order, and none of which are representative democracies, and the United States and our Allies—who for decades have successfully used nuclear deterrence to prevent war between the great powers, to forestall forcible territorial revision in Europe and Asia, and to preserve global stability.

The TPNW threatened nuclear weapon states (in particular, the United States) by challenging the narrative that their arsenals are necessary to preserve global peace and stability.

TPNW advocates did not seek higher rank within the nuclear hierarchy and were not negotiating for greater privileges. Instead, they sought to erase the nuclear hierarchy entirely. The TPNW "signifies that most of the world's states are no longer prepared to accord certain states special entitlements under international law" (Egeland, 2018: 11). As one civil society activist observed, the TPNW "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" (Interview 01, 10 October 2019). By challenging the legitimacy of the P5's nuclear weapons, this effort aims to subvert the discursive foundations of one of the most important hierarchic fields in world politics.

The consequences of the TPNW

Does the TPNW matter? The treaty will not, in the short term, convince nuclear weapon states to give up their nuclear weapons. However, it has already changed discussions about the symbolic value of nuclear weapons in world politics and the exceptional nature of the P5. This has forced the P5 to defend their continued possession of nuclear weapons, the legitimacy of which is no longer taken for granted. Moreover, it facilitates potential complications within other hierarchic fields, most notably by threatening the heart of the US alliance system.

One indication that the TPNW threatens the positions of superordinate actors within the nuclear hierarchy is that, instead of ignoring the effort, these actors have worked hard to delegitimize it. Immediately after the TPNW was passed in July 2017, the United States, United Kingdom, and France released a joint statement rejecting the treaty, claiming that it "clearly disregards the realities of the international security environment" and would create "even more divisions at a time when the world needs to remain united in the face of growing threats" (United States, United Kingdom and France, 2017). Shortly after, the United States established in May 2018 a new multilateral initiative that would serve as "a reality-based dialogue," in contrast to the TPNW's "essentially magical thinking" (Ford, 2018).[11] These moves implicitly acknowledged that the TPNW threatened the legitimacy of the United States' (and P5's) possession of nuclear weapons, as well as its standing. According to one diplomat, "the US effort to build a broader dialogue with the CEND means that they are worried and they care" (Interview 07, 4 December 2019). Others agreed that "the P5 and the US, in particular, are determined to not let the treaty change relations between states" (Interview 06, 29 November 2019) and that

> the P3 [the United States, United Kingdom, and France] are unified in their thinking on the TPNW. Their opposition has become fiercer over time since the treaty was concluded: they're realizing that having ignored it at the beginning gave life to the process. Now they criticize it constantly [. . .] The nuclear weapon states are trying to remain relevant. (Interview 04, 7 November 2019)

The P5's efforts to re-center themselves in governance of nuclear weapons were "a reaction that they are losing the ideological [international consensus] understanding of the underlying importance of nuclear weapons and strategic stability" (Interview 10, 27 February 2020).

As others have noted, how countries justify their actions reflects the international norms and standards they view as dominant in world politics:

> When states justify their [actions], they are drawing on and articulating shared values and expectations held by other decision makers and other publics in other states. It is literally an attempt to connect one's actions to standards of justice or, perhaps more generically, to standards of appropriate and acceptable behavior. (Finnemore, 1996: 159)

The P5 voiced their opposition in terms of the treaty being ineffective and counterproductive. Publicly, they "don't say they're opposed to disarmament, but to the method of pursuing it" and insist that they are "responsible" nuclear powers (Interview 05, 22 November 2019). This response implicitly acknowledges the potential discursive power of the TPNW's challenge to the nuclear hierarchy.

The TPNW's effort to delegitimize the nuclear hierarchy has broader ramifications as well. The unequal bargains between the United States and its allies constitute a key contractual element of a different hierarchic field—one involving responsibility for and privileges related to the promotion of international security. At the heart of these bargains is the United States' commitment to provide for the security of subordinate allies

(Ikenberry, 2011; Lake, 2009). The TPNW could potentially undermine these relationships by reducing perceptions of the legitimacy of the US nuclear deterrent. One month after the TPNW was signed, then-Assistant Secretary Ford (2017) argued that the ban treaty could

> make the world a more dangerous and unstable place by seeking to delegitimize the "extended deterrence" alliance relationships that the United States has with its allies in Europe and in the Asia-Pacific—relationships which for decades have contributed to international peace and security by deterring aggression by expansionist powers.

This concern is warranted: in a 2018 YouGov poll in Belgium, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands, more than half of respondents (and 70% of Germans) replied that US nuclear weapons should be removed from their country's territory (International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, 2018).[12] In addition, over two-thirds of respondents in each country agreed with the statement, "My country should sign the TPNW." The Netherlands, in particular, faces strong domestic pressure to support the TPNW. It was the only NATO state to participate in TPNW negotiations and did so due to pressure from the Dutch parliament and public opinion—although it ultimately voted against the treaty (Shirobokova, 2018). In addition, in January 2020, the Belgian parliament narrowly voted down a resolution to ratify the TPNW and remove US nuclear weapons from Belgian soil (Brzozowski, 2020).

If its members were to ratify the TPNW, NATO would likely be forced to alter its practices. While the NPT is silent on the legality of basing nuclear weapons in nonnuclear weapon states, the TPNW forbids it. US nuclear weapons are stationed in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey. Should any of these countries join the TPNW, the United States would have to withdraw these weapons—potentially undercutting a critical aspect of the alliance. In late 2021, Germany announced that it would participate in the first TPNW meeting of states parties as an observer, lending further legitimacy to the TPNW initiative. Ultimately, the Netherlands and Belgium also participated in the first TPNW meeting of states parties as observers in June 2022.

In addition, a Norwegian government study of the TPNW's impact on Norway concluded that if Norway ratified the TPNW, it could no longer participate in NATO's Nuclear Planning Group, "thus reducing Norway's influence on [NATO's] nuclear policy" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). Yet, in 2021 Norway announced its intention to participate in the first TPNW meeting as an observer. US policymakers have also claimed that if US military allies ratified the TPNW, their commitments under the treaty would make it "extremely difficult to carry out normal security cooperation" (Fabricius, 2017: 8). Whatever the practical consequences of Norway (or other NATO members that do not host nuclear weapons on their territory) joining the TPNW, the fact that the United States seeks to rhetorically damage the TPNW is indicative of its significance. By challenging the legitimacy of nuclear weapons in the security and defense of any state, the TPNW thus threatens the durability of the US alliance system. This could have second-order implications: if some NATO members joined the TPNW and undermined the alliance, others might perceive an increased need to develop their own nuclear deterrent.

Although smaller states' dissatisfaction with the status quo has often been dismissed, this case demonstrates how and why smaller states can (and do) challenge status quo rules, norms, and principles—creating very real concerns for states closer to the top of the global pecking order. In the future, the TPNW may facilitate similar challenges aimed at the productive foundations of related hierarchic fields. The treaty and the process leading to it provide a salient example for other would-be subversive revisionists seeking to challenge other elements of international hierarchy. They have also strengthened social and political resources that might aid future revisionist projects, especially by providing a discursive reframing of "humanitarianism" that stigmatizes a key symbol of great power status. Although the TPNW was not the first use of this framing in an effort to ban a class of military technology, its deployment against the legitimacy of such a central component of international hierarchy sets a potentially powerful precedent.[13]

Conclusion

How do actors work to change the status quo in world politics? In this paper, we have argued that prevailing conceptions of what revisionism is and how it works are too narrow. While much attention has been paid to attempts by relatively powerful states to compete in positional hierarchies, this is not the only way of revising international order. States can also challenge the normative and discursive foundations of hierarchical fields. Acknowledging this possibility has two important implications: first, since subversive revisionism involves different resources than positional revisionism, subversive revisionism is available to a wider range of actors than positional revisionism. This is thus a useful tool for understanding the foreign policies of small states, which often appear incomprehensible from the perspective of models and concepts developed to explain the behavior of great powers. Second, although revisionist challenges aimed at a hierarchy's normative and discursive foundations may not have the same kinds of immediate consequences that positional revisionist challenges have, they are still worth understanding. By undermining the legitimacy of hegemonic status symbols, ontologies, and discourses, subversive revisionist challenges may have significant middle and long-term consequences for a wide range of hierarchical arrangements. They are also cumulative in the sense that even failed subversive challenges might provide resources that facilitate future subversive challenges.

The TPNW is not the only potential case of subversive revisionism. Other efforts led by relatively weak actors—including the Non-Aligned Movement, the New International Economic Order, or the transnational decolonization movements of the 1950 and 1960s—also challenged the foundations of their respective hierarchies. These projects built on one another: the New International Economic Order's challenge to the neoliberal hierarchy that made newly decolonized states dependent on powerful states drew on discursive resources developed within prior decolonization efforts (Getachew, 2019: 144–145). By building transnational networks of activists and developing a common language for new "worldmaking," these subversive revisionist decolonization projects laid the foundation for challenges to economic hierarchy as well.

Future scholarship could expand this research by comparing different cases of subversive revisionism. Future scholarship might also examine different strategies adopted by

those at the top of international hierarchy when confronted with subversive challenges. In the case of the TPNW, the United States and other members of the P5 have aggressively contested the effort.[14] In other cases, however, powerful states might respond differently; either by ignoring revisionist challenges entirely or, alternatively, by accepting or even trying to coopt and tame them.

More broadly, our analysis further illustrates the value of hierarchy-based frameworks for understanding international politics. Grasping how hierarchical arrangements in different fields manifest in different ways and are produced by distinct but related processes involving unequal privileges, stratification, and discourses leads to rich insights about what motivates actors, what constrains them, and what facilitates different challenges to hierarchy.

Funding

ORCID iD

Naomi Egel https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9049-7975

Notes

1. Prominent scholarship on revisionism was developed by authors constructing "neoclassical realist" models that began from neorealist assumptions about the implications of anarchy but incorporated non-structural factors to explain additional variation. See, for instance, Schweller (1994) and Davidson (2006).
2. Interviews were conducted (in Geneva, Switzerland, in 2019 and 2020) on a not-for-attribution basis, given the sensitivity of the topics. Interviewees were selected based on their knowledge of and participation in the process leading to the TPNW. They include a wide range of stakeholders, to provide a comprehensive assessment of the TPNW's dynamics.
3. Egeland (2021: 2) similarly distinguishes between disarmament initiatives that subvert the status quo and those that supplement it.
4. Even if some proponents did not challenge the NPT itself, they challenged the hierarchy on which the NPT was based.
5. Although nonnuclear weapon states are not a homogeneous bloc, we use this term for the sake of simplicity to refer to the positions of most nonnuclear weapon states.
6. See also Considine (2019).
7. Arguments regarding the existence of a nuclear taboo, meanwhile, have always been strictly focused on the first use of nuclear weapons, not the broader possession of these weapons and associated hierarchical implications.
8. Ritchie and Egeland (2018: 130) make a similar point.
9. North Korea was not present for the vote.
10. Thakur (2018: 82) makes a similar point.
11. Although this response came from a Trump administration official, Obama administration officials criticized the initiative along similar lines.
12. However, in a 2008 survey, 84 percent of Italians and 78 percent of Germans surveyed expressed strong support for eliminating all nuclear weapons worldwide through an enforceable agreement, and over half in each country viewed nuclear sharing under NATO as morally

wrong (Simons Foundation, 2008). This continuity in public opposition to nuclear weapons suggests that the 2018 results are not a shift due to the TPNW but rather latent, ongoing dissatisfaction that may be more consequential in the context of the TPNW's revisionist effort. We thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this question.

13. As Mantilla (2020) and Bower (2020) have shown, these kinds of discursive developments can be mobilized by weaker actors to coerce stronger actors into making concessions with concrete consequences.

14. As Müller and Wunderlich (2020) and Gibbons (2019) examine in greater detail.

References

Acheson R (2018) Impacts of the nuclear ban: how outlawing nuclear weapons is changing the world. *Global Change, Peace and Security* 30(2): 243–250.

Barnhardt J (2016) Status competition and territorial aggression: evidence from the scramble for Africa. *Security Studies* 25(3): 385–419.

Berger T (1997) The past in the present: historical memory and German national security policy. *German Politics* 6(1): 39–59.

Berger T (2002) A perfectly normal abnormality: German foreign policy after Kosovo and Afghanistan. *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 3(2): 173–193.

Bernstein S (2020) The absence of great power responsibility in global environmental politics. *European Journal of International Relations* 26(1): 8–32.

Bially Mattern J and Zarakol A (2016) Hierarchies in world politics. *International Organization* 70(3): 623–654.

Bower A (2017) *Norms without the Great Powers: International Law and Changing Social Standards in World Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bower A (2020) Entrapping Gulliver: the United States and the antipersonnel mine ban. *Security Studies* 29(1): 128–161.

Brzozowski A (2020) Belgium debates phase-out of US nuclear weapons on its soil. *Euractiv*, 17 May. Available at: https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/belgium-debates-phase-out-of-us-nuclear-weapons-on-its-soil/

Chan M (2016) Non-nuclear weapons states must lead in shaping international norms on nuclear weapons: a practitioner commentary. *Global Policy* 7(3): 408–410.

Considine L (2019) Contests of legitimacy and value: the treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons and the logic of prohibition. *International Affairs* 95(5): 1075–1109.

Cooley A, Nexon D and Ward S (2019) Revising order or challenging the balance of military power? An alternative typology of revisionist and status-quo states. *Review of International Studies* 45(4): 689–708.

Crawford B and Olsen K (2017) The puzzle of persistence and power: explaining Germany's normative foreign policy. *German Politics* 26(4): 591–608.

Davidson J (2006) *The Origins of Revisionist and Status-Quo States*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Duque M (2018) Recognizing international status: a relational approach. *International Studies Quarterly* 62(3): 577–592.

Egel N (2022) *Regulating destruction: the politics of multilateral weapons governance*. PhD Dissertation, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY.

Egeland K (2017) *The road to prohibition: nuclear hierarchy and disarmament, 1968–2017*. PhD Dissertation, University of Oxford, Oxford.

Egeland K (2018) Banning the bomb: inconsequential posturing or meaningful stigmatization? *Global Governance* 24(1): 11–20.

Egeland K (2021) The ideology of nuclear order. *New Political Science* 43: 208–230.

Evers M (2017) On transgression. *International Studies Quarterly* 61(4): 786–794.

Fabricius P (2017) Nuclear ban: treaty will make the world more dangerous, not safer –US. *Daily Maverick*, 13 September. Available at: https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2017-09-13-nuclear-ban-treaty-will-make-the-world-more-dangerous-not-safer-us/

Fihn B (2018) Interview with Tony Robinson. *Pressenza*, 27 June. Available at: https://www.pressenza.com/author/tony-robinson/

Finnemore M (1996) Constructing norms of humanitarian intervention. In: Katzenstein P (ed.) *The Culture of National Security*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Finnemore M and Sikkink K (1998) International norm dynamics and political change. *International Organization* 52(4): 887–917.

Ford C (2017) Briefing on nuclear ban treaty by NSC senior director Christopher Ford. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 22 August. Available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/08/22/briefing-on-nuclear-ban-treaty-by-nsc-senior-director-christopher-ford-event-5675

Ford C (2018) *The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons: A Well-Intentioned Mistake*. Reykjavík: University of Iceland.

Gerring J and Cojucaru L (2016) Selecting cases for intensive analysis: a diversity of goals and methods. *Sociological Methods & Research* 45(3): 392–423.

Getachew A (2019) *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-determination*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Gibbons R (2018) The humanitarian turn in nuclear disarmament and the treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons. *The Nonproliferation Review* 25(1–2): 11–36.

Gibbons R (2019) Addressing the nuclear ban treaty. *The Washington Quarterly* 42(1): 27–40.

Gilady L (2017) *The Price of Prestige: Conspicuous Consumption in International Relations*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Government of Mexico (2014) *Chairs summary. Second conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons*. 14 February. Available at: https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000027687.pdf

Hanson M (2018) Normalizing zero nuclear weapons: the humanitarian road to the prohibition treaty. *Contemporary Security Policy* 39(3): 464–486.

He K, Feng H, Chan S, et al. (2021) Rethinking revisionism in world politics. *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 14(2): 1–28.

Ikenberry GJ (2011) *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (2018) One year on: European attitudes toward the treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons. Report, International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, Geneva.

Lake D (2009) *Hierarchy in International Relations*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Larson D and Shevchenko A (2010) Status seekers: Chinese and Russian responses to U.S. primacy. *International Security* 34(4): 63–95.

Levy J (1983) *War in the Modern Great Power System 1495-1975*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.

Maass R (2020) *The Picky Eagle: How Democracy and Xenophobia Limited U.S. Territorial Expansion*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Mantilla G (2020) Social pressure and the making of wartime civilian protection rules. *European Journal of International Relations* 26(2): 443–468.

Mearsheimer J (2001) *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2018) Review of the consequences for Norway of ratifying the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Report, Government of Norway, Oslo.

Müller H and Wunderlich C (2020) Nuclear disarmament without the nuclear-weapon states: the nuclear weapon ban treaty. *Daedalus* 149(2): 171–189.

Musgrave P and Nexon D (2018) Defending hierarchy from the moon to the Indian Ocean: symbolic capital and political dominance in early modern China and the Cold War. *International Organization* 72(3): 591–626.

Nexon D and Neumann I (2018) Hegemonic-order theory: a field-theoretic account. *European Journal of International Relations* 24(3): 662–686.

O'Neill B (2006) *Nuclear weapons and national prestige*. Cowles Foundation for Research in Economics discussion paper 1560. New Haven, CT: Yale University.

Petrova M (2018) Weapons prohibitions through immanent critique: NGOs as emancipatory and (de)securitising actors in security governance. *Review of International Studies* 44(4): 619–653.

Potter W (2017) Disarmament diplomacy and the nuclear ban treaty. *Survival* 59(4): 75–108.

Pouliot V (2016) *International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of Multilateral Diplomacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Price R (1998) Reversing the gun sights: transnational civil society targets land mines. *International Organization* 52(3): 613–644.

Ritchie N (2019) A hegemonic nuclear order: understanding the Ban Treaty and the power politics of nuclear weapons. *Contemporary Security Policy* 40(4): 409–434.

Ritchie N and Egeland K (2018) The diplomacy of resistance: power, hegemony and nuclear disarmament. *Global Change, Peace & Security* 30(2): 121–141.

Ruzicka J (2018) Behind the veil of good intentions: power analysis of the nuclear non-proliferation regime. *International Politics* 55: 369–385.

Ruzicka J (2019) The next great hope: the humanitarian approach to nuclear weapons. *Journal of International Political Theory* 15(3): 386–400.

Schweller R (1994) Bandwagoning for profit: bringing the revisionist state back in. *International Security* 19(1): 72–107.

Shirobokova E (2018) The Netherlands and the prohibition of nuclear weapons. *The Nonproliferation Review* 25(1–2): 37–49.

Simons Foundation (2008) *Global Public Opinion on Nuclear Weapons*. Report, Simons Foundation, New York.

Smetana M (2020) (De-)stigmatising the outsider: nuclear-armed India, United States, and the global nonproliferation order. *Journal of International Relations and Development* 23: 535–558.

Suzuki S (2008) Seeking "legitimate" great power status in post-cold war international society: China's and Japan's participation in UNPKO. *International Relations* 22(1): 45–63.

Thakur R (2018) The nuclear ban treaty: recasting a normative framework for disarmament. *The Washington Quarterly* 40(4): 71–95.

United Nations General Assembly (2016) Taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations. A/RES/71/258. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2017)595880#:~:text=On%2023%20December%202016%2C%20the,leading%20towards%20their%20total%20elimination'

United States, United Kingdom and France (2017) Adoption of a treaty banning nuclear weapons (Press Statement), 7 July. Available at: https://onu.delegfrance.org/Adoption-of-a-treaty-banning-nuclear-weapons

van Dijk W, Zeelenberg M and van der Pligt J (2003) Blessed are those who expect nothing: lowering expectations as a way of avoiding disappointment. *Journal of Economic Psychology* 24(4): 505–516.

Walker W (2012) *A Perpetual Menace: Nuclear Weapons and International Order*. London: Routledge.

Walt S (1987) *The Origins of Alliances*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Waltz K (1979) *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Ward S (2013) Race, status, and Japanese revisionism in the early 1930s. *Security Studies* 22(4): 607–639.

Ward S (2017) *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ward S (2019) Logics of stratified identity management in world politics. *International Theory* 11(2): 211–238.

Ward S (2020) Status, Stratified Rights, and Accommodation in International Relations. *Journal of Global Security Studies* 5(1): 160–178.

Weyland K (2019) Why some democracy protests do diffuse. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63(10): 2390–2401.

Williams H (2018) A nuclear babel: narratives around the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. *The Nonproliferation Review* 25(1–2): 51–63.

Zarakol A (ed.) (2017) *Hierarchies in World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Zeelenberg M, van Dijk W, Manstead A, et al. (2000) On bad decisions and disconfirmed expectancies: the psychology of regret and disappointment. *Cognition and Emotion* 14(4).

Author biographies

Naomi Egel is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University.

Steven Ward is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Cambridge.