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► **To cite this version:**

Kjølv Egeland. Oslo's "new Track": Norwegian Nuclear Disarmament Diplomacy, 2005–2013. *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, 2019, 2 (2), pp.468-490. 10.1080/25751654.2019.1671145 . hal-03630932

HAL Id: hal-03630932

<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-03630932>

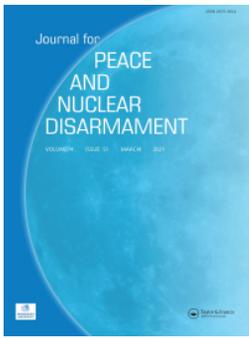
Submitted on 13 Mar 2024

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To cite this article: Kjølv Egeland (2019) Oslo's "new Track": Norwegian Nuclear Disarmament Diplomacy, 2005–2013, *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, 2:2, 468-490, DOI: [10.1080/25751654.2019.1671145](https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2019.1671145)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2019.1671145>



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Published online: 02 Oct 2019.



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Kjølv Egeland 

Sciences Po, Center for International Studies (CERI), Paris, France

ABSTRACT

Adopted by 122 non-nuclear-weapon states in July 2017, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) was promoted by a transnational network of government agencies, international organizations, and civil society actors. Now, as the agreement creeps towards entry into force, a debate about the history of the TPNW has begun. While supporters of the TPNW argue that the adoption of the treaty was a reasoned response to diplomatic impasse and the pileup of empirical evidence on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear detonations, revisionists have argued that the humanitarian initiative was never about banning nuclear weapons, but was hijacked by radicals eager to shame the Western nuclear powers or discredit the NPT. Reading the TPNW as a manifestation of "frustration" with lacking progress on disarmament in other forums, observers have framed the adoption of the TPNW as an irrational outburst of emotions. In this article, I investigate Norway's nuclear disarmament diplomacy in the period from 2005 to 2013. Against the revisionists, I argue that the goal of negotiating a new legal instrument outlawing nuclear weapons provided a key aim for the Norwegian centre-left coalition government from 2010 onwards. Drawing on elite interviews, internal MFA documents released on freedom of information requests, and official statements by foreign policy officials, I maintain that the humanitarian initiative, including the pursuit of a new legal instrument, was products of a carefully deliberated policy of strategic social construction.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 March 2019
Accepted 16 September 2019

KEYWORDS

Nuclear disarmament; Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW); foreign policy; strategic social construction; humanitarianism; norm entrepreneurs

Introduction

Promoted on the back of the Norwegian-initiated "humanitarian initiative" for nuclear disarmament, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) was adopted by 122 non-nuclear-weapon states in 2017. Following years of heated debate and underhand reports of diplomatic arm-twisting by major powers, the diplomatic struggles over the adoption of a treaty banning nuclear weapons are now over. But the debate about the history and merits of the agreement has only just begun. On the one hand, supporters of the TPNW cast the treaty as a reasoned response to mounting evidence about the humanitarian, environmental, and developmental impacts of nuclear detonations, and as a reasonable means of strengthening the norms of

international humanitarian law and nuclear non-possession (Ruff 2018; Thakur 2017; Meyer and Sauer 2018). On the other hand, revisionists have read the TPNW as an erratic outburst of emotion, irresponsibly executed and “disconnected and divorced from reality” (Kurokawa 2018, 525). Several commentators have intimated that the initiation of negotiations was the result of an opportunistic hijacking of the humanitarian initiative by radical states and NGOs. According to Emil Dall (2017, 3), for example, the humanitarian initiative evolved into a treaty process only because “some states (including Austria and Ireland) were diverting the conversation away from a facts-based discussion over nuclear use and towards references to ban processes” (see also Brende 2015). Adjudicating this controversy is of both academic and political relevance. After all, the allegation that the TPNW came about without plan or foresight has obvious implications for assessments of its future and merits.

Investigating the role of Norway in the formation of the humanitarian initiative, I argue that key members of the circle of individuals that instigated the humanitarian turn were indeed eager to promote a new track towards nuclear disarmament, including through a new legal instrument. And while Norwegian policymakers and their peers in Austria, Mexico, Switzerland, and various organizations may have been frustrated and disappointed by the nuclear-armed states’ unwillingness to implement agreed disarmament steps, the humanitarian initiative and the ban-treaty movement it fostered were based on a careful analysis of international nuclear politics and social change more broadly. Eager to transform the social environment in which nuclear politics is enacted, the architects of the humanitarian initiative consciously sought to undermine the prestige value of nuclear weapons, bring new facts and perspectives to the table, and open discursive space for new diplomatic approaches. Drawing on elite interviews, internal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) documents, and official statements by officials, I demonstrate that the humanitarian initiative and movement for a ban on nuclear weapons were products of a patient policy of “strategic social construction” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998).

The purpose of this article is to shed light on the Norwegian government’s nuclear disarmament advocacy from 2005 to 2013, in particular the launch of the so-called humanitarian initiative for nuclear disarmament. The article is not intended as a comprehensive history of the humanitarian initiative or TPNW, but rather as a focused investigation of the aims of the Norwegian government – the humanitarian initiative’s most central initial backer (Gibbons 2018). Following Norway’s disengagement from the humanitarian initiative in the fall of 2013, the leadership of the initiative passed to other states. Nevertheless, as argued by John Borrie, Michael Spies, and Wilfred Wan (2018, 104), how Norway came to launch an initiative opposed by all the nuclear-weapon states, including its close allies of Britain, France, and the United States, “is one of the most intriguing questions to be answered in understanding how the prohibition treaty process has emerged”. The following is an attempt at answering that question. The article is divided into two main parts. In the first, I empirically retrace Norway’s nuclear diplomacy in the period from 2005 to 2013. In the second, I discuss the national interests and government rationalities that conditioned Norwegian policymakers to act in the way they did.

The Evolution of Norway's Nuclear Disarmament Diplomacy, 2005–2013

“We Must Not Become Complacent”: The Conference on Disarmament and the NPT

From 2005 to 2013, Norway was governed by a “red–green” (centre–left) coalition of three parties: the Labour Party (the largest of the three, supplying both the prime minister and minister of foreign affairs), the Socialist Left, and the Centre Party. Forming Norway's first government coalition to control a majority of the seats in parliament since 1985, the red–green coalition entered government on a negotiated platform dubbed the Soria Moria Declaration (after the hotel at which the negotiations took place). According to the declaration, the government would “work to ensure that the NATO states take leadership in the struggle against weapons of mass destruction”.¹ Furthermore, “NATO must continuously re-evaluate its nuclear strategy to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in international affairs. Our goal is the complete elimination of nuclear weapons”. The Declaration further stipulated that Norway would actively promote the UN's work to develop new rules and standards. In the field of disarmament, the most specific commitment was a pledge to “work for an international prohibition on cluster bombs” (Arbeiderpartiet, Sosialistisk Venstreparti, and Senterpartiet 2005, 8–9).

Between 2005 and 2009, Norway's nuclear disarmament diplomacy was premised on participation in the so-called Seven Nation Initiative. Composed of Australia, Chile, Indonesia, Norway, Romania, South Africa, and the United Kingdom, the Seven Nation Initiative was conceived as a bridge-building coalition that would come up with practical solutions to help salvage the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) after what was widely considered a disastrous review conference in 2005 (Hanson 2010, 83). Yet it soon became clear that the spectrum of views within the Seven Nation Initiative was too wide for the coalition to operate effectively. The group dissolved after a few years and without leaving a lasting mark on the non-proliferation and disarmament regime. However, from 2007 onwards, Norway engaged in bilateral cooperation with the United Kingdom on the development of techniques for nuclear disarmament verification. This “UK–Norway Initiative,” involving the UK-based NGO VERTIC, remains in operation and has since contributed to other verification-development efforts, including the International Partnership for Nuclear Disarmament Verification (IPNDV).

Another focal point of Norway's nuclear disarmament diplomacy in the early phase of the red–green coalition's period in government was the convening of a nuclear disarmament conference in Oslo in 2008. Co-organized by the Norwegian government, the Norwegian Radiation Protection Authority, the Nuclear Threat Initiative, and the Hoover Institution, the International Conference on Nuclear Disarmament took place in Oslo in February 2008. The Conference gathered several renowned scholars and diplomats, but had little if any political impact. The topics of conversation lacked novelty, there was little involvement by civil society actors, and the diplomatic proposals discussed had already been on the agenda for decades.

From 2005 to 2008, the chief preoccupation of Norway's disarmament diplomats was the effort to ban cluster munitions – the most specific disarmament pledge

¹Citations from Norwegian sources are translated by the author of this article.

contained in the Soria Moria Declaration. In 2007, after years of largely fruitless work through the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW), the Norwegian government convened a major diplomatic conference in Oslo, kick-starting a humanitarian-oriented process outside the established institutional architecture. The Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM), also called the Oslo Convention, was adopted in 2008. The CCM process offered several apparent lessons for proponents of disarmament. A first lesson was that disarmament debates should be framed in humanitarian terms. A second was that civil society engagement and cooperation with international organizations was paramount. A third and crucial lesson was that the goal of securing consensus should not trump the goal of adopting a principled legal standard within a reasonable timeframe; the states with the lowest ambitions should not be allowed to block the development of new norms forever (Borrie 2009, 314–19).

In February of 2009, Norway's deputy minister of defence, Espen Barth Eide, argued that, although nuclear weapons were different to cluster munitions and antipersonnel landmines, "there are parallels and lessons to be learned from the humanitarian approach, which could benefit our work on disarmament and non-proliferation". Specifically, Eide highlighted the positive contributions of civil society actors and the importance of inclusivity in diplomatic processes, the latter a clear critique of the 65-member Conference on Disarmament (CD) (Eide 2009). In April, foreign minister Jonas Gahr Støre suggested that "we are finally dispensing with the mistaken assumption that the status quo is less risky than change" (Støre 2009b). Steffen Kongstad, a senior official in the MFA, took note of the "hopeful signs" provided by then-newly elected US president Barack Obama, but warned that "we must not become complacent [...]. We know by experience that the political winds will change in the capitals of the nuclear weapons states. We know that the nuclear lobby is still strong in key countries." If the international community was to achieve tangible results, Kongstad maintained, "we need the political pressure from voters, Civil Society and Academia. That was the case with the Mine Ban Convention in 1997 and the Convention on Cluster Munitions last year" (Kongstad 2009, 2).

Enthused by the success of the humanitarian approach to cluster munitions, the Norwegian government made it one of its chief aims leading up to the 2010 NPT Review Conference (RevCon) to "draw on experience from the humanitarian disarmament agenda, not least with respect to cross-regional work and inclusion of civil society" (MFA 2010a). Already before the RevCon, Norwegian diplomats in Geneva had been in contact with peers from states that had worked with Norway on the cluster munitions process to discuss a humanitarian approach to nuclear disarmament. Many of these diplomats were pessimistic about the prospects for achieving multilateral disarmament through the NPT review process alone (Ritchie and Egeland 2018, 127). Ten years earlier, in 2000, the NPT RevCon had adopted a first-ever fully negotiated final document, including 13 "Practical Steps" to implement the NPT's disarmament provisions. At the time, the 2000 NPT RevCon was perceived by many as a decisive victory for the cause of disarmament. But the implementation of the 13 Steps proved less than satisfactory, with certain nuclear-armed states explicitly stating that they did not see them as binding or agree with their content (Cortright and Väyrynen 2009, 41). In 2009, Norway's foreign minister, Jonas Gahr Støre, maintained that "the first ten

years of this century can be described as the lost decade” for nuclear disarmament (Støre 2009a).

For supporters of disarmament, the failure of the 13 Steps illustrated the need for a reset of the international community’s approach to nuclear disarmament. With the 13 Steps, the international community, including the major nuclear powers, had worked out and agreed on a set of defined commitments and benchmarks. The problem was that the nuclear-armed states simply did not honour them. Instead, the nuclear-armed states continued much as before, framing nuclear weapons as instruments of power and prestige or, at best, as necessary evils. The challenge for proponents of disarmament, then, was to create an environment in which nuclear weapons were seen not as legitimate instruments of security or symbols of prestige, but as unacceptable weapons of mass destruction. Until such a world was created, there was little reason to believe that the pattern of nuclear politics that had existed since the late 1940s – non-fulfilment of commitments, continuous nuclear “modernization”, and an ever-present risk of nuclear use or accidents – would continue. Admittedly, unilateral and bilateral measures undertaken since the late 1980s had provided for a large reduction in the overall number of nuclear weapons in the world. But, in the same period, the number of nuclear-armed states had increased, there were few if any signs that the major nuclear powers were making serious plans for a nuclear-weapon-free world, and there were still more than enough nuclear weapons in the world to threaten human civilization.

When the red–green coalition won re-election in the fall of 2009, a Soria Moria II Declaration was adopted. In it, the government promised to work for a reduction of the role of nuclear weapons in international affairs “through efforts to bring about a successful [NPT] Review Conference in 2010.” If such efforts proved unsuccessful, the government would “consider presenting our own Convention on Nuclear Weapons” (Arbeiderpartiet, Sosialistisk Venstreparti og Senterpartiet 2009, 7). What this “convention” would look like was not specified, leaving plenty of room for interpretation. Yet the inclusion of the phrase “our own” before “Convention on Nuclear Weapons” suggests that the agreement the drafters had in mind was different to the well-known “Model Nuclear Weapons Convention”, which had been promoted by Malaysia, Costa Rica, and a group of NGOs for years. Beyond this, the word “convention” could be interpreted as any legally binding agreement, including a limited agreement such as a ban on the use, or even first use, of nuclear weapons. While the realization of the Model Nuclear Weapon Convention would require the participation of all nuclear-armed states – meaning that such an agreement would be off the cards for the foreseeable future – a less ambitious “ban treaty” could be negotiated and adopted without the participation of the nuclear-armed states (Gibbons 2018). The semantic distinction between “convention” (*konvensjon*) and “treaty” (*traktat*) now popular in the disarmament community – with the former denoting a broad and detailed elimination agreement and the second a simpler prohibition agreement – did not come into widespread use until 2013.

In February 2010, at a conference convened by the Norwegian Atlantic Committee, Støre called for a humanitarian approach to nuclear disarmament. Støre’s speech at the Atlantic Committee Conference in February 2010 could arguably be understood as the public inauguration of the humanitarian initiative and the ban-treaty movement it engendered. The foreign minister asserted that “experience from humanitarian

disarmament should guide us on how to pursue and negotiate disarmament issues in general”, that “[w]e must strive to avoid the perception that acquiring nuclear weapons is a sign of international strength and prestige”, and maintained that it might be a good idea to ban nuclear weapons, even if not all states agreed. The responsibility of crafting new nuclear norms and institutions should not be left to the nuclear-weapon states alone, the foreign minister averred:

Some maintain that consensus is vital when it comes to nuclear disarmament. I am not fully convinced. I believe it would be possible to develop norms against the use of nuclear weapons, and even to outlaw them, without a consensus decision, and that such norms will eventually be applied globally. We cannot leave it to the nuclear weapon states alone to decide when it is time for them to do away with these weapons. Their destructive power would affect us all if put to use – and their threat continues to affect us all – therefore they are everyone’s business (Støre 2010a).

A few weeks later, a near identical passage was read out in Geneva by Norway’s deputy permanent representative to the CD (Skorpen 2010). In fact, similar views would be reiterated by Norwegian diplomats several times over the next few years. Norwegian diplomats stressed that nuclear weapons could be “outlawed” without a consensus decision, that there was a pressing need to develop new ideas and approaches, and that the use of nuclear weapons “would be illegal under international humanitarian law” (Angell-Hansen 2011; Pedersen 2012). The assertion that nuclear weapons could be outlawed “without a consensus decision” suggested that the Norwegian government contemplated the negotiation of a new legal instrument that would be less encompassing than the Model Nuclear Weapon Convention, the conclusion of which would require the participation and assent of all nuclear-armed states. The foreign minister’s claim that “experience from humanitarian disarmament should guide us on how to pursue and negotiate disarmament issues in general” similarly suggested that a new legal instrument could be adopted without key possessor-states involved. After all, both the Ottawa Mine Ban Treaty and the CCM had been negotiated and adopted without the support of the United States, Russia, and other major possessors of anti-personnel landmines and cluster munitions, respectively.

Norway was one of the most active participants in the 2010 NPT RevCon. Having learned from the fate of the 13 Steps, Norwegian diplomats maintained that any new disarmament steps should be given strict deadlines for completion. According to Harald Müller (2011, 229), “Norway took the most radical position among all Western countries”. In the end, the 2010 RevCon adopted a final document by consensus. In broad terms, the document re-packaged and elaborated the unfulfilled commitments adopted in 2000 – without deadlines. However, following advocacy by Norway, Switzerland, and a few other states, the NPT parties expressed “deep concern” at the “catastrophic humanitarian consequences that would result from the use of nuclear weapons” (NPT Review Conference 2010, 12). The humanitarian language included in the 2010 final document would form the rhetorical basis from which the humanitarian initiative was promoted over the next few years.

Another important development took place in November 2010, when the member states of NATO convened for a major summit in Lisbon. There, the Norwegian delegation successfully helped persuade the allies to include in the alliance’s new Strategic Concept

a commitment “to create the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons” (NATO 2010, 23). Yet, states on the opposite end of the spectrum successfully inserted into the Strategic Concept a pronouncement that NATO was a “nuclear alliance” – a rhetorical device US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had used earlier that year when rebuking the German government’s aspiration to have the last US nuclear weapons stationed in Germany withdrawn (Landler 2010). The statement that NATO is a “nuclear alliance” has since been vigorously employed in defence of the nuclear status quo.

“We Will Find Other Ways”: The Humanitarian Initiative for Nuclear Disarmament

Norwegian policymakers’ impatience with the status quo became increasingly clear in official statements in the years after the 2010 NPT RevCon. Just a few months after its conclusion, Norway’s minister of foreign affairs told diplomats in Geneva that Norway would seek new paths should the CD fail to implement the 2010 final document: “If the CD is not able to deliver on the expectations expressed by the NPT Review Conference, we will find other ways to pursue a world free of nuclear weapons” (Støre 2010b). As noted above, the red–green coalition’s government platform from 2009 to 2013, Soria Moria II, had committed Oslo to “consider presenting our own Convention on Nuclear Weapons” should the NPT review process fail to deliver meaningful progress. By 2010, the CD had been deadlocked for 14 years, hamstrung by certain members’ disagreements and lack of political will.

In an internal memo on the outcome of the 2010 RevCon, the Norwegian MFA highlighted a series of weaknesses in the final document and noted that many had indeed interpreted the RevCon as a “disappointment”. At the same time, the memo noted that the final document offered several opportunities to pursue the disarmament agenda, including through its emphasis on the “humanitarian aspect and international humanitarian law”. Summarizing how Norway should follow up on the RevCon, the memo established that a nuclear weapon ban treaty would be a “natural anchoring” of the “goal” of a world without nuclear weapons:

Norway’s overarching goal is a world without nuclear weapons. A legally binding instrument codifying a ban on nuclear weapons is a natural anchoring of this goal. [...] Norway has solid experience in working to establish the conditions to abolish inhumane weapons (MFA 2010b. Emphasis added).

In combination with the ministry’s public statements about the possibility of “out-lawing” nuclear weapons without a consensus decision, this memo, which was read and approved by the minister of foreign affairs, strongly suggests that the aim of promoting a treaty banning nuclear weapons – as distinct both from a comprehensive nuclear disarmament convention and a non-binding political declaration – was firmly moored in the Norwegian MFA.

In a February 2012 internal memo, entitled “A New Track Towards Nuclear Disarmament”, the Norwegian MFA’s Section on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation proposed that the foreign minister should convene a multilateral conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. The conference would be “a part of a broader effort to draw attention to the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons” (MFA 2012). The rationale was explained in the first few paragraphs:

This memo argues for a widening of the political room for manoeuvre in nuclear disarmament. We take note of the foreign minister's request for an assessment of a process towards a convention on nuclear weapons, the goals determined by Soria Moria II, and discussions and practical experiences made over the last months [...].

In 2010, the NPT Review Conference acknowledged for the first time the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons and the duty of all states to comply with international law and humanitarian law. The baton was picked up when the Red Cross in November 2011 unanimously adopted a historic resolution committing 187 national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies to work with authorities for a ban on nuclear weapons.

This development opens for nuclear disarmament efforts along several tracks and with different partners (MFA (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs) 2012, 1).

Pointing out that the paradigm of international humanitarian law had been strengthened in recent years, the Section argued that Norway should use this development “actively and strategically” to widen the political room for manoeuvre and advance nuclear disarmament (MFA (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs) 2012, 2). Further, the Section noted that the goal of a nuclear-weapon-free world was widely acknowledged and proclaimed by both the UN and NATO. The “dominant understanding of how this goal should be reached”, however, was that the international community should take “many small steps”, including bilateral stockpile reductions, non-proliferation and arms control efforts, and careful adjustments of military doctrines. The problem, according to the MFA, was that “the sum of these efforts [...] will hardly lead to the abolition of nuclear weapons. This undermines the political understanding on which the NPT is based” (MFA (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs) 2012, 2–3).

Two months later, in parliament, Støre publically announced that the Norwegian government would convene a conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons in Oslo. Støre drew a direct line between the then-incipient humanitarian initiative and the goal of a ban on nuclear weapons:

To achieve a binding prohibition on nuclear weapons, the most important thing we can do is to strengthen the political foundation for such a ban and to develop practical preconditions to bring us closer to our goal. On the political level, humanitarian engagement and the prospects for a further spread of nuclear weapons should give increased attention to the effects of nuclear weapons (Støre 2012b).

The broader humanitarian initiative, then, may be seen as an effort at building momentum for nuclear disarmament in general and a new legal instrument banning nuclear weapons in particular. That said, the Norwegian government had not committed to any specific proposal, let alone defined what it meant by the words “ban”, “convention”, or “prohibition” – all of which were used interchangeably. While the goal of adopting a new legal instrument even without a consensus decision was widely accepted within the Norwegian MFA – the Ministry of Defence appeared more sceptical (Gibbons 2018) – individual politicians and civil servants held different views about what that instrument should look like, when it would make sense to initiate a formal treaty-making process, and whether the inclusion of any particular states in that process would be necessary. Whereas some favoured a slow and steady cultivation of a new humanitarian paradigm that would evolve or bleed into a formal treaty-making process

only once certain nuclear-armed and/or aligned states had been brought inside, others were sceptical that the nuclear-armed states could ever be eased into accepting a ban. In this latter view, the adoption of a treaty banning nuclear weapons was itself a necessary instrument for change – a means of generating positive pressure for disarmament.

Norway played a pivotal role in the formation of a broad-based movement that over time became known as the humanitarian initiative. Two broad agendas, detailed below, were particularly important. The first of these was an attempt at shifting the mainstream diplomatic discourse on nuclear weapons and disarmament. The second was an attempt at unlocking the frozen institutional architecture, opening for deliberations on a new legal instrument.

Cultivating a Humanitarian Discourse on Nuclear Disarmament

A first strand of the effort at cultivating a humanitarian discourse on nuclear disarmament came in the form of increased funding for non-governmental norm entrepreneurs and expert milieus. Keen to sponsor fresh thinking on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, the Norwegian government provided initial or additional grants to disarmament organizations and think-tanks including Article 36, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), International Law and Policy Institute (ILPI), Norwegian People's Aid, and Reaching Critical Will (Østern 2015; Ritchie and Egeland 2018). These organizations would over the next few years provide analysis of diplomatic developments and create attention to the humanitarian initiative. In that way, the Norwegian government sought to foster a “counter hegemony” to the established common sense (Ritchie and Egeland 2018). ILPI and Article 36 spent much of their funding on so-called track II meetings (informal gatherings of diplomats and civil society actors). The first of these meetings, convened by ILPI in Amersham, UK in September 2011, addressed the merits of a potential ban on the use of nuclear weapons. Over time, most of the participants at the ILPI and Article 36 track II meetings adopted the view that it would be better to prohibit both the use *and* possession of nuclear arms. A comprehensive disarmament convention with detailed provisions for stockpile destruction and disarmament verification – provisions that could not be negotiated without the involvement of the nuclear-armed states – was deemed unrealistic for the foreseeable future (Hugo 2015).

Stretching back to before the 2010 RevCon, Norwegian diplomats in Geneva co-organized a series of lunch-meetings where key figures from the cluster munitions process discussed how non-nuclear-weapon states and civil society actors might boost the cause of nuclear disarmament. In the spring of 2012, this series of lunches resulted in a joint statement on the “humanitarian dimension” of nuclear disarmament delivered by Switzerland on behalf of 16 states to the NPT preparatory committee meeting in Vienna. Over the next few years, five similar statements would be delivered to multi-lateral conferences in Geneva and New York. The number of states subscribing to these joint statements grew at every opportunity, ending at 159 states at the NPT RevCon in 2015. Common to the statements was a focus on the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear detonations and a pronouncement that it was of vital importance that nuclear weapons never be used again “under any circumstances”. The latter phrase was the most controversial. As Canada's former ambassador for disarmament, Paul Meyer, points out, advocacy that nuclear weapons “are never used again, under any

circumstances” could be seen to contradict NATO policy, “which envisages, under certain circumstances, that nuclear weapons are used” (Meyer 2018). In 2009, Støre had argued that it was high time for non-nuclear allies to “engage in an earnest, even soul-searching discussion about the future of security guarantees and alliances in a world with far fewer and even zero nuclear weapons” (Støre 2009b). Nudged by Oslo, the NATO governments of Denmark and Iceland joined Norway in the soul searching by joining the joint statements. In this view, the humanitarian initiative was “political” and not just “facts-based” from its inception.

Then, in March 2013, the Norwegian government hosted the Oslo Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons. There had been debates within the government about whether a humanitarian approach to nuclear disarmament should be pursued exclusively through existing institutions such as the NPT and the UN General Assembly, or whether it should also be “taken out” of the established tracks. No doubt influenced by the positive experience of taking the issue of cluster munitions out of the CCW in 2007, the latter view eventually won out (Larsen 2016). According to an internal MFA memo, “nuclear weapons are shrouded in a series of old preconceptions that have largely been left unchallenged” (MFA (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs) 2012). A key purpose of the Conference, and humanitarian initiative more broadly, was to challenge those preconceptions through a facts-based discussion. The formal invitation to the Oslo Conference, which was sent out to all capitals and relevant international organisations in November 2012, presented the Conference as an opportunity “to provide an arena for a fact-based discussion of the humanitarian and developmental consequences associated with a nuclear weapon detonation” (MFA 2013c).

ICAN, which by then had abandoned the Model Convention and embraced a treaty banning nuclear weapons as its main campaigning aim (something the Norwegian government by all accounts was aware of), was made the government’s official “civil society partner” for the Oslo Conference. ICAN Norway was granted extra funds, enabling it to create attention to the event, and entrusted with coordinating a civil society forum in advance of the Conference proper (Løvold 2015). Norwegian policymakers had identified a need to revitalize the community of NGOs involved in nuclear disarmament diplomacy (Kongstad 2015), and appeared at the very least willing to put itself in a position where it would be pushed by ICAN and others to champion the idea of a simple treaty banning the possession and use of nuclear weapons. In this view, the politicking around the humanitarian initiative could be understood as a “two-level game” as theorized by Robert Putnam (1988): the government was reluctant to commit to a specific proposal, but provided ICAN with a platform in the knowledge that the NGO would use that platform to put pressure on the Norwegian and other governments to publically endorse the idea of a ban treaty. In contrast to the 2008 International Conference on Nuclear Disarmament, the 2013 Conference was designed, in part, to mobilize civil society actors, intergovernmental organizations, and a broad coalition of states to a humanitarian approach to nuclear disarmament.

The P5 collectively boycotted the Oslo Conference. Internal documents from the UK Foreign Office reveal that British officials believed the Conference would “seek to establish as gospel that nuclear weapons have such an indiscriminate effect, and must therefore be banned.” At the heart of the “humanitarian disarmament movement”,

British officials believed, was the principle that “any weapons which are indiscriminate in their effects should be outlawed” (Article 36 2013). The UK Foreign Office’s analysis of the burgeoning humanitarian initiative is understandable. As discussed above, the first joint statement on the humanitarian dimension of nuclear disarmament had already made it clear that its supporters were of the opinion that nuclear weapons should never be used again “under any circumstances”. Yet the Oslo Conference itself was by all accounts intended to be oriented towards facts-based discussion. The Norwegian government does not appear to have maintained any plans to use the Oslo Conference to promote specific diplomatic proposals, and Oslo had not been privy to the Mexican government’s intention to host a follow-up conference the next year (Larsen 2016) – an intention the Mexicans announced publically at the Oslo Conference. In contrast to the establishment of the UN open-ended working group on nuclear disarmament, discussed below, the Oslo Conference itself was not meant as a launch pad for substantive diplomatic deliberations. The Oslo Conference was rather perceived as a vehicle of providing new facts and perspectives that could spill into other processes, be it at the UN, NPT, or a humanitarian “outside” process (MFA 2013a). In the words of deputy foreign minister Gry Larsen, “we needed to change the way we talk about nuclear weapons, to change the discourse in the international community” (Larsen 2016. See also Eide 2013).

Despite the absence of the nuclear-armed members of the UN Security Council, the 2013 Oslo Conference was considered a great success by Norwegian policymakers. Attended by 128 government delegations – including a majority of the members of NATO – the Conference witnessed expert testimonies by scholars and humanitarian practitioners, as well as spirited calls for nuclear disarmament. According to the Norwegian MFA’s internal summary, the Conference had successfully contributed to creating a “new track”. The purpose of the Conference, according to the MFA, was to “establish an arena and a perspective” that might be followed up in various ways in the future (MFA (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs) 2013a). At the conclusion of the Conference, Espen Barth Eide, who had taken over the foreign ministry after a cabinet reshuffle, expressed in his personal capacity his hopes that the humanitarian track would be furthered:

Some believe in mutual negotiations in good faith. Some believe in regional agreements. Some believe in new legal instruments like a convention banning nuclear weapons. We have not had that as a particular subject of this conference. But I do believe, and I do hope, that we have introduced new vigour, new knowledge, new thinking, and, as mentioned, a new sense of urgency into all these debates, which is why I am so happy that Mexico has suggested that we can take this debate onwards (Eide 2013).

The March 2013 Oslo Conference would eventually be followed by conferences in Nayarit (February 2014) and Vienna (December 2014) on the same topic. At the Vienna Conference, the hosts issued a “pledge”, open to assent by likeminded states, to “stigmatise, prohibit and eliminate” nuclear weapons (Austria 2014). The idea of outlawing nuclear weapons through a new legal instrument, promoted by Norway from 2010 onwards, had taken root in the international community. The institutional agenda, however, would be carried out elsewhere.

Circumventing the Conference on Disarmament

A second agenda was to unblock the institutional architecture for nuclear disarmament negotiations. In concert with Austria and Mexico, Norway backed the establishment of a new diplomatic forum to address nuclear disarmament. In its summary of the 2010 NPT RevCon, the Norwegian MFA had expressed regret that the final document had emphasized the importance of the CD – “a body that for 14 years has refrained from doing anything at all of practical value, or even decide on what the Conference is supposed to be doing, and that is limited to 65 countries and closed for civil society participation” (MFA (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs) 2010b). At the 2011 session of the UN General Assembly First Committee, the Austrian, Mexican, and Norwegian delegations announced that, should the CD turn in another barren year in 2012, they would table a resolution mandating the establishment of an open-ended working group (OEWG) on nuclear disarmament under the auspices of the UN General Assembly. A year later, following another year without negotiations in the still deadlocked CD, Austria, Mexico, and Norway went through with their plan and tabled a resolution establishing an OEWG to “develop proposals to take forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations” (UN General Assembly 2013). The OEWG-resolution received stiff pushback from the nuclear-weapon states, but was nevertheless adopted by a large majority (Fihn 2012).

Convening in 2013, the OEWG enabled supporters of disarmament to further highlight the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons and, crucially, to begin a discussion on how non-nuclear-weapon states might take the institutional agenda forwards. In hindsight, the most important contribution was made by the New Agenda Coalition, a disarmament ginger group made up of Brazil, Egypt Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, and South Africa. In a working paper exploring actions needed to bring about a world without nuclear weapons, the New Agenda Coalition made a distinction between “interim” and “end state” measures. While interim measures such as nuclear-weapon stockpile reductions and the negotiation of a fissile material (cut-off) treaty could help *attain* a world without nuclear weapons, end state measures such as legally binding prohibitions against the development, possession, and use of nuclear weapons would be needed to *maintain* such a world. In the NAC’s view, however, there was no reason why work on end-state measures could not be launched immediately (New Agenda Coalition 2013). Indeed, it could be argued that a treaty banning nuclear weapons could help stigmatize nuclear weapons and, by extension, facilitate the pursuit of disarmament. In contrast to the interim measures, the end-state measures could be negotiated and adopted without the participation of the nuclear-armed states. A second OEWG on nuclear disarmament was convened in 2016 (this time without the support of the Norwegian government, which by then was made up of a right-wing coalition of the Conservative Party and Progress Party). The 2016 OEWG concluded with the adoption of an outcome document recommending that the UN General Assembly approve a mandate for negotiations on a treaty banning nuclear weapons in 2017.

Norway’s Disengagement from the Humanitarian Initiative

Following the fall 2013 general election in Norway, the centre-left coalition of Labour, the Socialist Left, and the Centre Party was replaced by a right-wing coalition composed

of the Conservative Party and Progress Party. The new government quickly changed course on nuclear disarmament, disassociating from the humanitarian initiative (not only the ban effort) and slashing or discontinuing nuclear disarmament-related funding for a range of organizations (Østern 2015). The new government also made a series of negative statements about the merits of a treaty banning nuclear weapons (Norway 2015), and the new foreign minister, Børge Brende, argued that the humanitarian initiative had been usurped by a new and radical ban movement (Brende 2015). In 2017, the Norwegian government became one of the first governments to announce that it would boycott the TPNW negotiations, paving the way for other NATO members to do the same. The eventual emergence of a NATO consensus against any new legal instrument has subsequently made it difficult for Labour and the Centre Party, traditional supporters of tight transatlantic security cooperation, to defend and support the TPNW.

Representatives of the junior partners of the red–green coalition, the Socialist Left and the Centre Party, have been highly critical of the incumbent government’s opposition to the ban (the Conservative–Progress coalition won re-election in 2017). Wary of being branded “anti-NATO”, representatives of the Labour Party have been somewhat less consistent in their criticism, in some instances even hostile to the TPNW. Jonas Gahr Støre, however, now Labour leader, stated in 2017 that he initiated the humanitarian initiative “to obtain a ban on nuclear weapons” (Støre 2017) and that “the process that led to what happened at the UN was started by Norway” (Konstad 2017. See also Nybakk 2015). In August 2017, Støre responded to a question from a journalist about whether Norway under a Labour government would support the TPNW by stating that “we [Norway] ended up not participating in the negotiation process. So I will have to look at the agreement before I decide whether it is right for us. [...] I will take a close look at the international, diplomatic situation before I say how we will do it (Støre 2017). In Norway, the political debate about the TPNW is likely to continue over the next few years. The actions of other states, in particular NATO members, is likely to have a significant impact on the Labour Party’s assessment of the merits of accession. At the Labour Party Conference in 2019, a motion calling on the Party to work for Norway’s early signature of the TPNW was narrowly defeated (the participation in the Conference and active opposition to the TPNW by Jens Stoltenberg, former Labour leader and now Secretary-General of NATO, was rumoured to have swung the balance against the motion). The compromise motion states that the TPNW is a worthwhile initiative that “helps build the stigma around nuclear weapons”, but that Labour does not support accession under the present conditions. However, signature is identified as a long-term goal:

The current geopolitical situation makes it politically impossible for NATO-countries like Norway to sign without reducing our chances of influence and protection. It should be a goal for Norway and other NATO-countries to sign the nuclear ban treaty. Norway should invite likeminded states in and outside of NATO to cooperate on disarmament (Arbeiderpartiet 2019, 2).

Støre, who had opposed the draft proposal to commit to the TPNW immediately, argued in his concluding speech that certain (unspecified) TPNW provisions made it difficult for Norway as a NATO member to support the treaty as adopted, especially as no other NATO members had offered their support (Støre 2019).

Explaining the Norwegian Stance

Historical Background

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, members of the Norwegian defence establishment explored the option of nuclear armament (Forland 1997). However, over the course of the 1950s, Norway's budding nuclear ambitions were reversed. In 1957, a unanimous Labour Conference – the Labour Party was in power for all but one month between 1945 and 1965 – adopted a motion that nuclear weapons “shall not be stationed on Norwegian territory” (Arbeiderpartiet 1958, 269). A few months later, when the US government in the aftermath of the “Sputnik shock” offered to deploy nuclear weapons to Norway, prime minister Einar Gerhardsen declined. Instead, at the NATO summit in Paris in December 1957, Gerhardsen encouraged the United States to engage the Soviet Union in disarmament talks – an intervention that reportedly “caused a great stir” at the NATO headquarters (Melissen 1994, 263). In 1961, the Norwegian parliament formally established that, in the absence of significant changes to the international situation, nuclear weapons would not be stationed in Norway. This apparent softening of the unconditional “no” to nuclear weapons adopted by the Labour Conference in 1957, as well as the government's supposed meek opposition to the stationing of US nuclear weapons in West Germany, led to a rift in the governing Labour Party and formation of what is today the Socialist Left Party. Since then, there has been little discussion in Norway about nuclear weapons as instruments of security. On the contrary, Norwegian white papers on defence and international affairs have typically identified nuclear weapons solely as objects of disarmament.

The Norwegian centre-left's general scepticism towards nuclear weapons, crystallized in the 1950s and 1960s, was the first of at least two underlying conditions for Norway's nuclear disarmament advocacy in the period from 2005 to 2013. The second was the rise to prominence in Norwegian foreign policy of what is today referred to as the “policy of engagement”, that is, an internationalist discourse and attendant practices of development aid provision, peace and reconciliation efforts, peacekeeping, and advocacy for international norms and law. Halvard Leira (2013) argues that the self-understanding of Norway and Norwegians as particularly “peaceful” and a unique force for good on the world stage dates to the end of the nineteenth century. Yet it was not until the late 1980s that the policy of engagement was explicitly articulated and positioned at the heart of Norway's foreign policy (Leira 2013, 353; Wohlforth et al. 2018, 538).

Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament

Three Labour Party politicians played key roles in the development of the humanitarian initiative: Jonas Gahr Støre (foreign minister from 2005 to 2012, minister of health services from 2012 to 2013), Espen Barth Eide (serving in various roles, including minister of defence from 2011 to 2012 and foreign minister from 2012 to 2013), and Gry Larsen (initially advisor to Støre, then deputy foreign minister from 2009 to 2013). Civil servants in Oslo and at the Norwegian mission to the UN in Geneva, perhaps most notably Steffen Kongstad and Annette Abelsen, also played important roles in the formation of the initiative.

Three sources of outside stimulus also bear mentioning. The first of these was the advocacy of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement and International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). By his own recounting, Støre, a former leader of the Norwegian Red Cross, maintained close contact with key figures in the ICRC throughout the period studied, and was influenced by the ICRC's reengagement with the issue of nuclear disarmament in 2010–2011 (Støre 2012a, 2015. See Gibbons 2018). A second source of stimulus was UNIDIR's research project on "Disarmament as Humanitarian Action", which helped develop the intellectual framework of "humanitarian disarmament", shaping the views of at least certain Norwegian officials. Carried out between September 2004 and December 2008 and funded by the governments of Norway and the Netherlands, the project was designed to "analyse and compare different negotiating processes, reframe multilateral disarmament negotiation processes in humanitarian terms, [and] formulate practical proposals to apply humanitarian concepts to assist disarmament negotiations" (UNIDIR 2019). Lastly, between 2007 and 2011, George Schultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn wrote a series of much-discussed op-eds calling for nuclear disarmament. The articulation by a group of former US policymakers with somewhat hawkish reputations of the vision of a world without nuclear weapons provided proponents of disarmament with rhetorical armour against allegations of dovish naïveté. US president Barack Obama's 2009 Prague speech further lifted the issue of nuclear disarmament on the international agenda, allowing Oslo to take the disarmament agenda forwards without immediately being accused of acting in contradiction with NATO policy (Hanson 2010; Senn and Elhardt 2014; Støre 2015).

Judging by internal MFA documents and elite interviews, the Norwegian government's decision to champion a humanitarian approach to nuclear disarmament was fostered by two interrelated interests. First, influential figures in the Norwegian foreign policy establishment were convinced that the traditional approach to nuclear disarmament was failing, perpetuating unacceptable risks for Norway and the world at large. A new track was needed to energize the cause of disarmament. Second, as proliferation crises were playing out in Iran and North Korea, Norwegian policymakers were wary that a lack of genuine results on the disarmament agenda could undermine and eventually discredit the NPT and the norm of non-proliferation. In the following, I discuss these concerns in greater detail. However, before moving on to the interests driving Norwegian policymakers, a simple material factor bears mentioning: the Norwegian MFA is very well funded for its size, meaning that Norwegian diplomats have at their disposal the means to take forward initiatives many of their peers in other governments do not.

The primary purpose of the humanitarian initiative was quite simply to advance nuclear disarmament. For Norwegian officials, the existence of nuclear weapons posed unacceptable risks for Norwegian and international security (Kongstad 2009). As put in a February 2012 internal MFA memo, studies had shown that even a limited nuclear war could have devastating global consequences, including for food supplies (MFA (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs) 2012). In May 2012, Norway's foreign minister, Jonas Gahr Støre, argued in a newspaper op-ed that "the danger of nuclear use is perhaps greater than ever. [...] Nuclear disarmament is good security policy." The disarmament agenda was in urgent need of a vitamin injection, Støre maintained, hinting to the Red Cross' advocacy for a ban:

There is need for a new motor in the work for disarmament. I think the time has come to place the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons on the agenda. Norwegian Red Cross played an important role when the international Red Cross Movement in November agreed to work for a ban on nuclear weapons. This is a powerful signal. Norway is, and shall be, a clear voice that contributes to strengthening the humanitarian perspective in international politics. We all bear a right and a duty to protect ourselves from the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons (Støre 2012a).

For the red–green coalition, promotion of humanitarian principles was justified not only as a “soft” moral duty, but also as a means of safeguarding Norway’s “hard” security interests. In this view, security policy was not just about making savvy political or military moves on the chessboard of international politics, but also about changing the rules and parameters of the game. By promoting norms of military restraint, economic development, and respect for human dignity, so went the argument, Norway would enhance its security. In 2009, Støre’s MFA had released what would become one of the most discussed (and praised) Norwegian government white papers over the last several decades. One of the key claims of White Paper 15 was that a narrow conception of national interests was no longer viable:

As a consequence of globalisation and Norway’s heavy dependency on global public goods, it is necessary to abandon a narrow interpretation of Norwegian interest-based policy. [...] The traditional distinction between “soft” idealpolitik and “hard” realpolitik has become less meaningful (MFA 2009, 93–94).

White Paper 15 specifically noted that “Norway’s policy for humanitarian disarmament [...] demonstrates that Norwegian security policy and our policy of engagement are two parts of a coherent whole” (MFA (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs) 2009, 93).

A second important motive for the launch of the humanitarian initiative was an aspiration to buttress the non-proliferation regime. Jon Wolfsthal – assistant to the US president between 2014 and 2017 – has suggested that the instigators of the TPNW were motivated by a desire to “discredit the NPT and the other existing vehicles for disarmament” (Kurokawa 2018, 525). The internal documents, elite interviews, and public statements analysed here suggest that the opposite was the case. In 2009, at a conference convened by Carnegie, Støre argued that “[w]e cannot consolidate and sustain nonproliferation while neglecting disarmament steps” (Støre 2009b). In April 2012 – one month before the Norwegian MFA’s announcement of the Oslo Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons – Støre told NRK Radio that he was deeply concerned by the prospect of the NPT falling apart. “I’m very much afraid that, if the NPT ends up collapsing, which we feared it would during the last so-called review conference, the lid will be off. It will, as it were, be a free for all” (Støre 2012c). A few weeks later, when Støre announced the plan to convene the Oslo Conference to the Norwegian parliament, the foreign minister argued that lack of progress towards disarmament “undermines the political understanding on which the NPT is based, namely that the nuclear-weapon states commit to disarmament, while nuclear-free states commit not to acquire nuclear weapons” (Støre 2012b). In fact, negative attitudes to disarmament “threaten the legitimacy and integrity of the non-proliferation regime, undercutting the work to prevent additional states from obtaining

nuclear arms”. In 2015, Støre elucidated his view that the NPT review conferences in 2005 and 2010 had demonstrated a need for new energy in the work for disarmament:

Both occasions were marked by perceptions that the regime was in a crisis, and that the integrity of the NPT could fall apart if there was not enough ambition to take it forward. [...] The NPT is founded on three increasingly connected pillars: the right to peaceful use of nuclear energy, non-proliferation, and disarmament. The non-proliferation pillar received plenty of attention from Western states, including the nuclear-weapon-states. And with the exception of Iran, the peaceful use pillar was not very controversial, in part because of the role of the IAEA. The disarmament pillar, however, was under more strain and lack of progress, and had been for some time. Many states argued that as long as there was no progress on disarmament, arguments for strengthening the other two pillars would fall flat (Støre 2015).

Støre was not alone to harbour concern for the NPT. In the years leading up to the initiation of the humanitarian initiative, a range of observers had suggested that the NPT was fraying (Sauer 2006; Dhanapala 2008; Allison 2010; Doyle 2010; Auner 2011). According to internal Norwegian MFA memos, lacking progress on disarmament threatened the “legitimacy and effectiveness” of the NPT, as well as the “sustainability” of non-proliferation more generally (MFA (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs) 2012; MFA (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs) 2010a; MFA 2013b). In its internal summary of the Oslo Conference, the Norwegian MFA commented that the P5 had opted to decline the invitation to participate, and that their reason had been that the Conference could “disturb existing disarmament efforts”. However,

From the Norwegian perspective, we have seen the Oslo Conference as a contribution to following up the shared acknowledgement of the “catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons” [...]. The humanitarian focus is not a contradiction of the NPT or other initiatives, but rather a contribution to the fulfilment of the NPT and other international commitments (MFA (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs) 2013a).

The Norwegian government’s sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of the NPT may be explained both by Norway’s immediate security interests in preventing the spread of nuclear weapons and Norwegian policymakers’ self-understanding as agents of international order (compare Neumann 2011, 563).

Norwegian policymakers were undoubtedly aware that the humanitarian approach could prove controversial, not least with Norway’s close allies of Britain, France, and the United States. The P5’s opposition to the Oslo Conference and, in particular, the OEWG was seen from Oslo as regrettable, albeit not very surprising. It seems clear, however, that any apprehensions about potential negative reactions from Norway’s allies were outweighed by the concerns discussed above. Those responsible for the launch of the humanitarian initiative were convinced that close cooperation and alignment with nuclear-armed states did not rule out advocacy for nuclear disarmament; on the contrary, being a good ally implied raising important conversations, even – or perhaps particularly – when the topic was controversial. The cluster munitions process had demonstrated that initially-reluctant allies could be allayed or even brought inside through careful diplomacy and dialogue. The Norwegian government was thus able to overcome what Pelopidas (2015, 53) refers to as the obstacle of the “expected veto player.

A number of observers have interpreted the TPNW as an outcome of its supporters’ “frustration”, “disappointment”, or “anger” with the status quo. For example, in the view of

one observer, the “root causes” of the ban-treaty movement were the “politics of disarmament and frustration with the NPT” (Williams 2017, 205). According to the French delegation to the 2018 UN General Assembly First Committee session, the TPNW was an outcome of an “emotional and divisive” approach that was “disconnected from today’s strategic context” (United Nations 2018). Whether intentional or not, the impression left by these commentators is that the adoption of the TPNW was the result of an irrational outburst of affect. Yet the use by diplomats of emotional language does not prove either that their actions were caused by emotions or that the emotions or actions in question were irrational. As Todd Hall argues, state-level displays of emotion could be understood as a form of rational diplomatic signalling designed “to shape the perceptions and behaviors of others in order to achieve particular ends” (Hall 2015, 2–3). I suggest that the primary drivers of the ban initiative were not “frustration” or “disappointment”, but the material risks associated with nuclear weapons, concern for the long-term viability of the NPT, long-standing demands for justice, and a belief in the productive power of norms (Ritchie and Egeland 2018).

Conclusion

Between 2005 and 2013, the Norwegian government led a humanitarian turn in nuclear disarmament diplomacy. Eager to breathe new life into the disarmament agenda and buttress the non-proliferation regime, the government gave financial and political support to disarmament groups and research institutes, co-organized a series of joint statements on the “humanitarian dimension” of nuclear disarmament, convened a major conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons, and initiated the establishment of an OEWG circumventing the deadlocked CD. The red–green coalition’s energetic nuclear disarmament advocacy was conditioned by the Norwegian left’s norms of solidarity and internationalism, but was also shaped by the drive and views of the group of individuals identified above. The humanitarian initiative culminated with the 2017 adoption of the TPNW. By 2017, however, the red–green coalition that initiated the humanitarian initiative had long since lost power in Oslo. Following the fall 2013 elections, Norway swung from being one of the humanitarian initiative’s strongest supporters to actively opposing it. That said, it is not clear that the red–green coalition would necessarily have supported the ban-treaty movement as it unfolded. Any Norwegian government would have found it difficult to support a nuclear disarmament instrument if no other NATO members could be persuaded to join. However, if Oslo had continued to guide the humanitarian initiative, the nuclear-armed members of NATO would likely have found it more difficult to chaperone a unified resistance.

It is difficult to gauge the success of the humanitarian initiative. On the one hand, comprehensive nuclear disarmament looks more distant than ever, with the Cold War arms control architecture fraying and large-scale nuclear modernization programmes ongoing in all nuclear-armed states. On the other hand, the humanitarian initiative and TPNW have both been understood as normative seeds that might not bear fruit for several years or decades. It could also be argued that, all else equal, the adoption by a large group of states of an unconditional prohibition on nuclear weapons reduces “demand-side” proliferation pressures and strengthens efforts to create a norm of nuclear non-possession. The TPNW also commits parties that have already concluded an IAEA Additional Protocol to maintain the Protocol in force, bolstering non-proliferation efforts on the “supply side”. While opponents of the TPNW have argued that the new treaty challenges or even undermines

the NPT, the nuclear weapon ban treaty and wider humanitarian initiative in this view appears to have strengthened the non-proliferation regime, precisely as the architects of the initiative wanted (Considine 2019).

Analysts adhering to the “realist” school of IR theory typically conceptualize arms control and disarmament as epiphenomena of material power relations (Martin 2013). Proponents of disarmament, including supporters of the humanitarian approach to nuclear weapons, have been criticized for overlooking the realities of realpolitik (Ruzicka 2019). Yet the architects of the humanitarian initiative and TPNW were certainly not blind to power. On the contrary, as the analysis above indicates, the instigators of the humanitarian initiative proceeded from a careful analysis of the power structures underpinning the nuclear status quo. Specifically, they proceeded from the assumption that the continued existence of nuclear weapons was conditioned not just by states’ desire to maintain or further their ability to exercise coercive material power, but also by discursive structures and ideas. Power, in this perspective, is not just about brute material force, but also about the forces determining when and how the application of such force is deemed acceptable. In particular, the proponents of the initiative targeted the enduring “prestige value” of nuclear weapons – the view that nuclear weapons offer tangible symbols of a state’s military might, technological competence, and masculine prowess – and furthered an alternative hegemony centred on humanitarianism (Ritchie and Egeland 2018). While the TPNW alone will not be enough to secure the abolition of nuclear weapons, a stronger norm against nuclear weapons could be seen as a necessary (but not by itself sufficient) condition for any successful nuclear disarmament process. Through the humanitarian initiative, the Norwegian government was engaged in a practice of strategic social construction aimed at re-constituting the social structures that govern nuclear politics. Nuclear disarmament will not be accomplished until this effort is successfully completed.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement 841764.

Notes on Contributor

Dr Kjølvs Egeland is a post-doctoral fellow at Sciences Po, Center for International Studies (CERI), CNRS, Nuclear Knowledges, Paris, France and a researcher at the Norwegian Academy of International Law.

ORCID

Kjølvs Egeland  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9818-698X>

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