A Hegemonic Nuclear Order: Understanding the Ban Treaty and the Power Politics of Nuclear Weapons

Nick Ritchie

Department of Politics, University of York, York, UK

Corresponding email: nick.ritchie@york.ac.uk

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The notion of a “global nuclear order” has entered the lexicon of nuclear politics. The 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons has prompted further questions about how we understand it. Yet missing from analysis of nuclear order and the “ban treaty” is a critical analysis of the power relations that constitute that order. This article develops a critical account of global nuclear order by applying Robert Cox’s concept of hegemony and power to the global politics of nuclear weapons, drawing on the politics of the ban treaty. It theorizes a “nuclear control order” as a hegemonic structure of power, one that has been made much more explicit through the negotiation of the ban treaty. This fills a void by taking hegemony and power seriously in theorizing nuclear order, as well as explaining both the meaning of the ban treaty and its limits.

Keywords: nuclear weapons, ban treaty, nuclear order, hegemony, power, humanitarian initiative

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Nick Ritchie is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Politics, University of York, UK. Prior to that he was a Research Fellow at the Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford. His publications include, with K. Egeland, “The Diplomacy of Resistance: Power, Hegemony and Nuclear Disarmament” (*Global Change, Peace and Security*, 30, 2, 2018); “Nuclear Identities and Scottish Independence” (*The Non-Proliferation Review*, 23, 5-6, 2016); “Waiting for Kant: Devaluing and Delegitimising Nuclear Weapons” (*International Affairs,* 90, 3, 2014); “Valuing and Devaluing Nuclear Weapons” (*Contemporary Security Policy* 34, 1, 2013); “Rethinking Security: A Critical Analysis of the Strategic Defence and Security Review” (*International Affairs,* 87, 2, 2011); A Nuclear Weapons-Free World? Britain, Trident, and the Challenges Ahead (2013) and U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy Since the End of the Cold War: Russians, ‘Rogues’ and Domestic Division (2008).

# Introduction

The idea of “global nuclear order” has emerged as an important concept in debate on the global politics of nuclear weapons. Thinking about nuclear order has revolved around the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), nuclear deterrence, the possession and control of nuclear weapons and materials, and nuclear abolition. Most recently, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW, or “ban treaty”) negotiated in 2017 and the “humanitarian initiative on nuclear weapons” (HINW) from which it emerged represent a significant challenge to established ideas of nuclear order. They have explicitly attempted to delegitimize and stigmatize nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence through a new and unequivocal legal instrument under the auspices of the United Nations. In doing so, they provide an opportunity to develop a more critical understanding of what “global nuclear order” is, which is the purpose of this article. Indeed, the HINW emerged from deep misgivings about nuclear order–the prevailing set of ideas, institutions, and practices that comprises the global politics of nuclear weapons. The ban treaty, in turn, has generated fierce criticism for undermining that order and it has coincided with a number of other destabilizing developments, including the deterioration of the U.S.-Russia relationship and nuclear arms control processes, nuclear threats by Moscow to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies, a credible long-range North Korean nuclear arsenal, the potential collapse of the Iran deal, and a serious questioning of U.S. nuclear security commitments by its allies under the Trump administration. Together, these developments–the ban treaty on the one hand and renewed nuclear threat-making and the erosion of nuclear arms control on the other–signal a period of nuclear “ordering anxiety.” This is in many ways symptomatic of a wider geopolitical and cultural angst in the United States and industrialized North about the fate of the “liberal international order.” Both expressions of ordering anxiety–the specific nuclear dimension and the wider geopolitical frame–are at heart about the future of hegemonic structures of power in global politics.

Recent analysis of global nuclear order has not engaged seriously with power and hegemony (Harnisch, 2014; Horsburgh, 2015; Walker, 2012). Neither has much of the scholarship on the humanitarian initiative (Onderco, 2017; Potter, 2017; Sauer & Pretorius, 2014), which has yet to locate it in firmly the context of the global politics of nuclear weapons. What is missing from both areas is a critical analysis of the power relations that constitute nuclear order and to which the ban treaty poses a significant challenge. There are important reasons for doing this: first, to understand contemporary global nuclear order and nuclear ordering anxiety; second, to understand the significance and limits of the ban treaty in the context of ideas of nuclear order; and third, to understand responses to both.

The absence of serious engagement with hegemony in global nuclear politics is particularly surprising given its hierarchical nature, the preeminent role of the United States in ordering global nuclear politics over the past 70 years, the hegemonic authority ascribed to the NPT, and the relative stability of nuclear ordering ideas and practices developed through the 1960s and 1970s despite the inequalities they perpetuate (Nuti, 2018). The relationship between hegemony and nuclear order might appear obvious to some; perhaps an unstated but accepted state of affairs given the ready conflation of hegemony with U.S. power and the proportion of nuclear-related analysis that originates in the United States about the United States. But, as Deudney observed in 2014, “the extensive literatures on hegemony and nuclear weapons… have surprisingly little overlap, almost as if they were exploring phenomena from different eras rather than one” (p. 196).

Hegemony and power are, however, slippery concepts with competing definitions and theoretical treatments in international politics and sociology (Lentner, 2006). This article develops a framework for global nuclear order using Robert Cox’s theory of hegemony that was in turn inspired by Antonio Gramsci. Cox develops an expansive concept of hegemony that encompasses different forms of power. It overcomes some of the limits of realist, liberal, constructivist, and English School conceptions of hegemony, power, and the relationship between them through a more holistic framework that synthesizes material capabilities, institutions, and ideas into a structural conception of hegemony. It is this synthesis, I argue, that enables an analysis of nuclear order that more accurately captures both the complicated realities and power relations of nuclear politics at the global level, the concern with nuclear injustice and inequality underpinning the ban treaty, and the central role of the United States in nuclear ordering. This article, then, develops an argument about what nuclear order is and how it is reproduced, using the ban treaty as a way in.

# Nuclear order and nuclear hegemony

## Nuclear order

Contemporary analysis of global nuclear order tends to ignore power in general and hegemony in particular, which is puzzling for the reasons outlined above. The most comprehensive account of nuclear order is provided by William Walker’s English School analysis (2000, 2004, 2012)*.* He frames nuclear order as two interacting logics of nuclear armament (what he calls “deterrence plus”) and disarmament (“non-proliferation plus”) whose tensions are managed through a third logic of restraint as a “pragmatic middle way” based on norms, rules, and institutions, especially the NPT (Walker, 2012, p. 5). But Walker’s impressive account does not engage seriously with power and hegemony. The power to say what counts as nuclear order, what its political ends are, how the rules and values of nuclear order are shaped and operationalized, is often left in the background. Who, for example, gets to do the “management” of Walker’s systems of (dis)engagement with civil and military nuclear technologies? To what political ends are rules developed, practices legitimated, and systems managed? Just as Hedley Bull was criticized by Stanley Hoffman for not being “explicit enough in analyzing the relations between power and the common rules and institutions of international society” in his account of international society on which Walker draws (2002, p. xxvii), so too can Walker.

Where power is present in the literature on nuclear order, it is usually deployed in either a realist or discursive form. Realist analysis tends to define nuclear order in terms of the relative distribution of material power amongst major states under anarchy that dictates why states do or do not acquire nuclear weapons with little or no explanatory room for institutions, norms, culture or structures of social relations (for example Bracken, 2004, p. 155; Ruhle, 2007). Discursive analysis centers on the productive power of nuclear discourses (see below) but tends to limit discussion of power in global nuclear politics to this domain (for example Cohn, 1987; Gusterson, 1999; Moshizardeh, 2007). Other accounts rooted in liberalism and English School theory explain nuclear order in terms of the collection of formal international organizations established to control, limit, and monitor nuclear weapons, technologies, and materials, especially the NPT (for example Horsburgh, 2015; Kapur, 2000; Roberts, 2007). Others take Walker’s framework as given and use it to develop benign conceptions of “responsible nuclear sovereignty” that acknowledge the power to determine and institutionalize “constitutive norms of responsible nuclear behavior,” but do not then engage with it (Leveringhaus & Estrada, 2018, p. 487).

There are two exceptions that do take power seriously. First, Biswas’ (2014) post-colonial critique of the nuclear non-proliferation regime in which she asks critical questions about what nuclear order does, what it excludes and the interests it serves. But even though she takes Walker’s liberal optimism to task, there is only a limited engagement with the question of what nuclear order “is,” the power relations that constitute it, and its structures of inclusion and exclusion. Her analysis concentrates instead on the fetishization of nuclear weapons and the production of “nuclear desire” that perpetuates the inter-subjective value of nuclear weapons, drawing extensively on Harrington (2009). The second exception is Ruzicka’s (2018) recent analysis of the power relations underpinning the nuclear non-proliferation regime. Ruzicka uses a similar typology of power to that employed here and this article in many ways extends his analysis beyond the NPT to a broader consideration of how hegemonic structures of power constitute a global nuclear control order.

## The ban treaty

The ban treaty was negotiated by 122 states in July 2017 at the UN to prohibit the development, testing, production, manufacturing, possession, stockpiling, transfer and stationing of nuclear weapons, the threat or use of nuclear weapons, and any support for prohibited nuclear weapons activities. It was the culmination of the HINW that emerged in the late 2000s. The initiative and the ban treaty were symptomatic of widespread concern about the continued existence of nuclear weapons and frustration at the pace of nuclear disarmament. By the late 1990s many countries had become increasingly concerned that the nuclear-weapons states would never deliver on their commitment to disarm and that they viewed their possession of nuclear weapons as permanent, with all the risks of their eventual use this entailed. Following the fractious NPT Review Conference in 2005 and the negotiation of the Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM) in 2008, a group of diplomats and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) central to the CCM’s success sought to actively reframe nuclear weapons as unacceptable and illegitimate based on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear violence (Kongstad, 2009, April 15; Lewis, 2009; Wareham & Hughes, 2008, October 18).[[1]](#footnote-1)

These ideas were supported by the International Committee of Red Cross ahead of the 2010 NPT Review Conference, whose final document acknowledged that “any use” of nuclear weapons would have “catastrophic humanitarian consequences” (*2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Final Document: Volume 1*, 2010, p. para. I(a)(v); Kellenberger, 2010, April 20). This lent support for a humanitarian reframing of nuclear disarmament led by states such as Austria, Mexico, Norway, and Switzerland (Kmentt, 2015). Their initiative gathered momentum and by 2012 the idea of a nuclear weapons prohibition treaty began to take root. After a series of inter-governmental conferences on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons and two UN Open-Ended Working Groups (OEWG) on next steps in multilateral nuclear disarmament, the UN General Assembly voted in October 2016 to commence negotiations the following year.

The ban treaty explicitly challenges the legitimacy of nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence as instruments of statecraft. It represents a major challenge, or act of collective resistance, to the structures and institutions of global nuclear politics that legitimize nuclear weapons. Yet the literature on the humanitarian initiative and the ban treaty has little to say about power and nuclear order, even though scholarship on the process first emerged in 2013 (for example Ritchie, 2013a). Instead, the burgeoning literature to date has focused primarily on explaining the history and process of the initiative (Borrie, Spies, & Wan, 2018; Potter, 2017), the risks of nuclear violence (Bagshaw, 2013; Borrie, Caughley, & Wan, 2017), the ethics of a ban treaty (Doyle, 2015; Williams, 2016), IHL and a ban treaty (Maresca & Mitchell, 2015), the practical case for and against a nuclear weapons prohibition as a form of “humanitarian disarmament” (Egeland, Hugo, Løvold, & Nystuen, 2018; cf. Roberts, 2018; Sauer & Pretorius, 2014), the potential impact on the NPT (Kütt & Steffek, 2015; Onderco, 2017), the verification of a ban treaty (Scheffran, 2018), and the initiative’s discourse (Considine, 2017). The exceptions are Hanson’s (2018) recent analysis of the ways in which the ban treaty challenges “nuclearism” (see below) by empowering non-nuclear-armed states and reframing nuclear politics around humanitarianism. These themes are further developed in Ritchie and Egeland’s (2018) analysis of the humanitarian initiative as a transnational advocacy network that has used productive and institutional power to resist established structures of nuclear power, and on which this article builds.

## Nuclear hegemony

Having argued so far that we should not ignore hegemony and power in our analyses of global nuclear order but that we routinely do, I turn to Cox’s theory of hegemony and world order to rectify this. I do so for a number of reasons. First, because Cox was expressly concerned with order as a contingent historical *structure* of power relations and it is the relationship between conceptions of order and established power structures in the global politics of nuclear weapons that I am interested in. This structural understanding was inspired by Gramsci’s notion of hegemony based on structures of power and consent that configure and legitimize unequal power (1981, 1983). Second, Cox adopts a pluralistic approach to power freed from the constraints of state-centric analysis that avoids a narrow focus on either material, institutional, or ideational power that often characterizes realist, liberal and constructivist approaches respectively. It also foregrounds power in a way that English School analyses of nuclear order tend not to (Cox & Sinclair, 1996, p. 68). This pluralistic approach based on analysis of historical structures enables a more critical and, I argue, accurate, analysis of global nuclear order that “is directed to the social and political complex as a whole rather than to the separate parts” (Cox, 1981, p. 129). Third, Cox argues that particular historical structures are understood not in the abstract, but through empirical engagement with their historical context *and* through the study of emergent or latent “rival structures expressing alternative possibilities of development,” and this is where the HINW and ban treaty are central to the study of contemporary global nuclear order (Cox, 1981, p. 137).

Cox was clear that the historical structures that constitute a particular world order can be hegemonic or non-hegemonic. In transposing Cox’s theory of order and historical structures power from his global level to the study of nuclear order, I argue that the structures of power that constitute nuclear order are hegemonic, for now at least. Cox associates hegemony with the stability of a historical structure of power underpinning a particular world order, and it is that stability–now being challenged and generating “ordering anxiety”–that underpins my argument. Cox theorizes hegemony as a dominant historical structure based on three expressions of power–material, institutional, and ideological–that interact reciprocally. Hegemony, in this structural sense, refers to “a particular combination of thought patterns, material conditions, and human institutions which has a certain coherence among its elements” (Cox, 1981, p. 135). A hegemonic structure of power is therefore a historical “fit” or “coherent conjunction” between material power, ideas, and institutions in world politics (Cox, 1981, p. 140). As Gill puts it, it is “an historical congruence between material forces, institutions and ideologies, or broadly, an alliance of different forces politically organized around a set of hegemonic ideas that [gives] strategic direction and coherence to its constituent elements” (Gill, 2003, p. 58).

A dominant historical structure can coincide with the dominance of a single leading state, such as the United States, and indeed this can be a necessary condition for its emergence. U.S. power is certainly central to the hegemonic structure of nuclear order insofar as no other actor, coalition, or network has exerted or enjoyed the depth and breadth of power to try and organize global nuclear politics. Walker, for example, paternalistically labels nuclear order “the particular child of the United States” (2007, p. 431). Moreover, the broader historical context of nuclear order is the embedding of U.S. power in global politics after 1945 through the socioeconomic structures of capitalism, its expansion after the Cold War, and a determination to extend the “unipolar moment” indefinitely as market, banker, and enforcer of last resort (Krauthammer, 1991).

Nevertheless, Cox is clear that even though a powerful state might be a necessary condition for the emergence of a hegemonic structure of power, it is not sufficient or reducible to it. Similarly, nuclear order is not reducible to U.S. power: It is a structure of power in global politics in which the United States is deeply embedded and empowered as a dominant actor and in which the patterns and goals of nuclear order generally reflect its power and preferences along with those of its allies and, at times, its adversaries and other states. To clarify the point: The power of the United States as an agent is central to this *structural* conception of hegemony. Where others might define hegemony purely in terms of a single powerful state and power in only its material and “compulsory” forms (Wohlforth & Brooks, 2011), I employ a broader conception of both hegemony and power, one in which U.S. material and compulsory power are a central plot line but only part of the story (for a discussion, see Worth, 2015, pp. 1-18). I am *not* arguing that the United States enjoys direct hierarchical control of nuclear relationships and institutions, that it has been successful in all its ordering endeavors, that it is the only key actor involved in nuclear ordering, or that the problems of nuclear politics are exclusively Washington’s, far from it. Hegemony is instead understood as a circumscribed structure power that is not imposed by diktat from above but is, as Cox notes, “a power structure seeking to maintain consensus through bargaining” between the dominant and dominated (1981, p. 145; for an agency-based analysis of U.S. nuclear hegemony and its erosion, see Hayes, 2018).

The following sections apply Cox’s framework by examining the core material capabilities, institutions and ordering ideas of global nuclear politics along with the hegemonic power of the structural configuration itself. In doing so, I draw on the typology of power developed by Barnett and Duvall (2005), which maps conceptually on to Cox’s framework. It encompasses compulsory, institutional, productive and structural expressions of power that are “simultaneously present in international politics and… provides a systemic way of thinking about power in terms of both agency and structure” (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 44). This reveals the power structures of a contemporary hegemonic nuclear control order in which the United States is deeply and uniquely implicated and against which the ban treaty has been pitched.

# A nuclear control order

## Material capabilities and nuclear order

The first pillar of Cox’s historical structure is the configuration of material capabilities. This reflects a realist conception of power in terms of the differential distribution of material capabilities and the exercise of what Barnett and Duvall called compulsory power by one actor over another through force, threat and coercion (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 50). The material foundation of nuclear order is chiefly nuclear weapons and the nuclear complexes that support them.[[2]](#footnote-2) This is based in a fundamental sense on Bernard Brodie’s observation in 1946 that “everything about the atomic bomb is overshadowed by the twin facts that it exists and that its destructive power is fantastically great” (p. 41). This material dimension has two key features at the global level: first, the continual development of nuclear weapons and their use to threaten, coerce and reassure in order to advance states’ interests; second, the use of other forms of military and economic compulsory power to control the acquisition of nuclear weapons by others.

The first has been dominated by the United States and Soviet Union/Russia in terms of their massive nuclear arsenals capable still now of civilizational omnicide. This includes the use of nuclear weapons as a form of compulsory power based on permanent preparations for short-notice preemptive or retaliatory nuclear attacks to try and affect the behavior of other states through general and tailored nuclear threats. It has involved successive generations of nuclear weapons, nuclear delivery systems, and missile defenses in an effort to bolster the credibility and capability of nuclear deterrent threats, as well as innovations in nuclear strategy generally pioneered by the United States (Freedman, 1989). In fact, the United States’ and Russia’s capacity for nuclear violence has been at the heart of material compulsory power in global nuclear order. This has included consistent pursuit of nuclear superiority, particularly by the United States, through more accurate and flexible weapon systems in order to fight and “win” a nuclear war should deterrence break down, preemptively if necessary, even as both states have consolidated and reduced their weapon systems through arms control agreements (Lieber & Press, 2006; Rosenberg, 1983). The material presence of nuclear weapons with command and control systems capable of rapid and unprecedented violence has now become a permanent feature of global politics, evidenced in the massive investment across all nuclear-armed states in nuclear modernization programs.

The second dimension has involved a range of disciplinary mechanisms to surveil, control, reform and punish the nuclear aspirations of others, particularly subordinates who violate hegemonic preferences (Lake, 2014, p. 67). A core purpose of the emergent nuclear order was to control the spread of the new weapon primarily by those that already had them, even whilst developing and threatening to use their own. U.S. power has been central to this process, chiefly to control the dissemination of nuclear weapons that could jeopardize its ability to project power and promote its interests, notably in the key regions of Europe, the Middle East and East Asia, and thereby reproduce its singular power position in the Western bloc during the Cold War and on a more global basis since (Russett, 2011, p. 73). This has taken the form of what Gavin (2015, p. 11) calls “strategies of inhibition” applied to friends and foes alike, including aid, conventional arms sales, alliances and extended nuclear deterrence; export controls and sanctions, interdiction and sabotage, and direct military attack. For example, the United States used its alliance relationships to coerce the likes of Germany, South Korea and Taiwan to terminate their nuclear weapon programs through the threat of abandonment (Gerzhoy, 2015) and to limit their nuclear cooperation agreements with other countries (Gray, 2012).

This extended into the post-Cold War period with a new focus on preventing the acquisition of nuclear weapons by regional “rogue states” alongside calls for new “mini-nukes” to potentially attack such states as part of a more aggressive shift from nuclear non-proliferation to counter-proliferation (Kristensen & Handler, 1996; Roberts, 1993). The United States and its allies now routinely exercise compulsory military, economic, and diplomatic power as a means of nuclear ordering, up to and including counter-proliferation war and the vast system of counter-proliferation sanctions, legal judgements, and diplomatic pressure from the U.S. and through the UN Security Council (including the use of United States courts as international courts through extraterritorial application of its domestic law). No other state comes close to the depth and breadth of compulsory material power exercised by the United States in relation to nuclear ordering.

## Institutions and nuclear order

Formal institutions are the second pillar of Cox’s historical structures because they stabilize and perpetuate a particular order by legitimizing its norms, generating consent for unequal power through common rules and obligations, co-opting dissenters, absorbing counter-hegemonic ideas, and “administer[ing] the order with a certain semblance of universality (i.e. not just as the overt instrument of a particular state’s dominance)” (Cox, 1983, p. 139; also Hurrell, 2007, p. 72). Institutional power is exercised through the different relations actors have with an institution in terms of their capacity to shape agendas, mobilize collective action, and constrain or enable specific institutional practices and choices. Informally, however, compulsory power is never far away from institutionalized consent and institutions often represent “frozen configurations of privilege and bias that continue to shape the future choices of actors” (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 52; also Cox, 1981, p. 136).

The NPT is widely accepted as the preeminent international institution of nuclear order. The treaty established a formal hierarchy of weapon-possessor states and an informal hierarchy of nuclear technology suppliers. Its focus was not on nuclear weapons themselves, but on their acquisition by other states beyond the five that had by then developed them. In that context, the treaty was the product of a temporary superpower condominium to preclude any restraints on their nuclear weapon production complexes and military competition and to retain an unbridgeable qualitative and quantitative lead over other nuclear-armed or arming states, whilst working to prevent the acquisition of nuclear weapons by others, notably West Germany (Brands, 2007; Millar, 1971). In doing so, they recognized the need to secure acceptance from an expanding number of post-colonial states in the global South and skeptical allies to institutionalize an unequal hierarchy of nuclear power in terms of the possession of nuclear weapons through a range of incentives and engagement opportunities, such as the NPT’s five-yearly review conferences (Hunt, 2015). The result of this “nuclear Yalta” was a powerful institution of nuclear ordering that privileged the five states recognized by the treaty as nuclear weapon states (NWS: United States, Soviet Union, France, United Kingdom, and China), but particularly the two nuclear superpowers (Popp, 2014, p. 200). The NPT has since become an institution used to legitimize the continued possession of nuclear weapons by the five and a post-Cold War U.S. role as NPT enforcer through a range of disciplinary practices. It has become a hegemonic vehicle that constitutes and is used to reinforce a particular conception of nuclear order.

An institutional chain of enforcement centered only on non-proliferation commitments runs through the NPT to the UN Security Council via the second core institution of global nuclear order: The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and its Board of Governors. The IAEA’s mandate negotiated in the 1950s is a further example of superpower collusion to try and manage and control the nuclear programs of others. Its mandate and work program, originally centered on technical assistance, now reproduces a nuclear order dominated by non-proliferation and safeguards (Roehrlich, 2018). A network of other institutions has grown up around the NPT and IAEA to monitor and control nuclear energy and weapon programs, notably exclusive export control cartels and transnational regulatory networks such as the Nuclear Suppliers Group and Zangger Committee. These institutions are not neutral but politicized fora that fix systems of bias, privilege and inequality that in turn shape how actors participate in them and their capacities to act (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 52). The NPT nuclear weapon states are central to these core institutional sites of nuclear ordering at a global level.

There are two other important ordering institutions, and the United States is uniquely embedded in both. First, the series of nuclear alliance relationships through the formal institution of NATO and its Nuclear Planning Group and the informal institution of bilateral nuclear alliance relationships in Asia, with all the opportunities and challenges for nuclear control this affords. Second, the political-technocratic institution of bilateral U.S.-Russia nuclear arms limitation. This was developed to organize and constrain the Cold War nuclear arms competition and manage the risk of nuclear violence in crises through limits on the number and types of strategic nuclear delivery systems and, for a period, missile defenses. Arms control emerged as a technical and managerial response to the Cold War ideological and political competition that displaced disarmament as means of reducing nuclear risk.

Powerful states, in particular the United States, also have a greater capacity to select how, when and which institutions and norms to draw on or ignore to legitimize particular actions (e.g. demonizing and sanctioning the Iranian but not Israeli nuclear program), re-write the rules (e.g. through the 2008 nuclear trade agreement with India and attempts to secure Indian membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group), extend institutional reach (e.g. expanding the criminalization and intrusive regulation of nuclear activity post-9/11 through UN Security Council Resolution 1540 and the U.S.-led nuclear security summits), and set agendas (e.g. working with allies, the other NPT nuclear weapon states, and civil society to organize the “non-proliferation complex” around a particular conception of nuclear threat, order, and appropriate responses (Craig & Ruzicka, 2013)).

## Ordering ideas and nuclear order

Cox’s third pillar of historical structures is ideas, specifically the central role of collective “ordering ideas.” He described these as “a structure of values and understandings about the nature of order that permeates a whole system of states and non-state entities,” one in which “these values and understandings are relatively stable and unquestioned” (Cox, 1981, p. 136; Cox & Sinclair, 1996, p. 151). It is the acceptance of a set of ordering ideas that generates broad consent for a hegemonic structure and its hierarchy of power (Cox, 1983, p. 164). Barnett and Duvall (2005, p. 56) describe this as “productive power”: the power of discourses to shape the identities of social actors and to shape what counts as legitimate knowledge and possible, acceptable, and meaningful actions.

The nuclear control order is underpinned by three core hegemonic ideas: that nuclear deterrence practiced by “responsible” states is necessary, manageable and stabilizing; that the spread of nuclear weapons is an inevitable but unacceptable danger to an international liberal order, which is itself a global public good; and that nuclear power is a redemptive tool for national development. These ideas are reflected in two powerful discourses of “nuclearism” and “proliferationism” that form a hegemonic ideology of nuclear order. Nuclearism was first defined by Lifton and Falk (1991) as the “psychological, political, and military dependence on nuclear weapons, the embrace of weapons as a solution to a wide variety of human dilemmas, most ironically that of ‘security’” (p. xix). Booth (1999a, p. 3) later framed nuclear deterrence as “structural nuclearism” reflecting the broadly neorealist logic that powerful states *must* retain nuclear weapons indefinitely because of the possibility that others (especially “rogues”) might retain or acquire them and that security can only ultimately rest on threats of genocidal nuclear violence. This justified the trillions of dollars spent on preparations to fight a nuclear World War III that was constructed as permanently imminent and that continues today through heavy investment in nuclear weapon systems across all nuclear-armed states. Consequently, other ways of thinking about security, justice, and nuclear order were sidelined through indoctrination, socialization, and exclusion of those who did not embrace nuclearism (Booth, 1999b, p. 47). Nuclearism has therefore “normalized” nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence as intrinsic to everyday national and global security in ways that elide discussion of the consequences of actual use and enable a process of nuclear “forgetting” in which the dangers of living in a nuclear-armed world are downplayed (Hanson, 2018, pp. 466-467). Krieger (1999)and Peoples (2016) go further by erasing the boundary between commercial and military nuclear technologies to include nuclear power alongside nuclear weapons. Nuclearism, for Krieger (1999), is “the belief that nuclear weapons and nuclear power are essential forms of progress that in the right hands will protect peace and further the human condition” (p. 109).For Peoples (2016), nuclearism includes the idea that nuclear power as well as nuclear weapons can be redemptive for humanity (he calls this “nutopianism”). Nuclearism is therefore not only an ideology of security through nuclear threat-making but an ideology of national development through optimistic promises of nuclear power. The was cemented in the NPT’s exceptional move of making access to nuclear technology an “inalienable right” (Peoples, 2016).

Proliferationism is a discourse that treats the spread of nuclear weapons as inevitable and thereby justifies or naturalizes both nuclearism and a range of disciplinary non-proliferation practices, often captured in the idea of a linear proliferation chain (see Dunn & Overholt, 1976 for the original argument; see Reed & Stillman, 2009 for a contemporary linear analysis). Pelopidas (2011) exposes and critiques this “proliferation paradigm” as a politicized reading of nuclear history that imagines the deterministic spread of nuclear weapons as a metaphorical “contagion” in international society driven by shared ideas about innate and positive qualities of nuclear weapons. He shows how this generates “requirements” for control, surveillance, punishment and nuclear threat-making to establish obstacles in the way of the weapons’ “inevitable” spread that must be actively contained. It is based on a view of nuclear proliferation as a natural and linear “chain reaction” or “domino effect” that takes on a momentum of its own, ignoring what Muller and Schmidt (2010) identify as the “phenomenon of deproliferation.” Proliferationism, in turn, reflects a broadly Western form of nuclear exceptionalism in which the liberal values underpinning Western polities justify selective possession of nuclear weapons. This view suggests that nuclear weapons are *not* morally equivalent: Western nuclear weapons are inherently legitimate and good for international peace and security; those in the hands of authoritarian states or states beyond the West’s sphere of influence are illegitimate and undermine a Western understanding of international order (Cooper, 2006, pp. 370-374). More broadly, the suppliers of nuclear technology by whom control is exerted are the “states of the advanced industrialized world” and their allies, recipients are those outside this privileged group, with rogues cast as deviants who challenge this hierarchy (Mutimer, 2000, p. 157). This view frames the spread of nuclear weapons as “the greatest single threat to world security for the rest of our lives” in the words of Krauthammer (1991), who urges the West “to police these weapons and those who brandish them” (p. 32) and insists there is no one to do that but the United States.

These ordering ideas produce shared nuclear “regimes of truth” about what nuclear weapons mean, what they can do in terms of security, stability, and deterrence, why they are valued, and what and who count as legitimate or illegitimate nuclear actions and actors (Ritchie, 2013b). First, they naturalize and exceptionalize nuclear weapons and nuclear power programs in specific ways that imbue them with extraordinary symbolic power (Abraham, 2010). Second, they establish (or “produce”) nuclear actors in specific ways as “rogue,” dangerous, and unstable or alternatively civilized, Western, developed, or responsible, including the category of “superpower” that, for the United States, “is inexorably tied – not only militarily and politically but also psychologically – to its nuclear domination” (Lifton, 2001, p. 29). Third, they naturalize nuclear deterrence and proliferation in ways that produce particular versions of the nuclear past *and* the nuclear future that restrict the ways in which we can understand and address the challenges that stem from the existence nuclear weapons in fallible human hands (Pelopidas, 2016). These discourses are contested, not least by the less powerful discourse of nuclear disarmament. But nuclearism and proliferationism remain deeply embedded in the global politics of nuclear weapons as shared understandings of “nuclear truth” amongst the world’s most powerful states with significant buy-in from many less powerful states, including through the NPT.

## Structural power and nuclear order

Cox argues that a hegemonic structure emerges when material capabilities, ordering ideas and institutions come together in a “coherent conjunction” with each other in a particular historical context. This “fit” creates a hegemonic structure that has discrete structural effects that cannot be reduced to either of its three pillars. It is these structural effects in the form of “structural power,” understood as enduring social relations of domination, that gets to the heart of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony and Cox’s framework (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 53). Here, structure empowers some actors in superordinate structural positions with greater capacities to act relative to other disempowered actors in subordinate structural positions.

The core structure of global nuclear order is an international security structure that aligns the positions of NPT NWS with those of permanent membership of the UN Security Council in an oligarchic security hierarchy in which some are structurally advantaged and others are structurally disadvantaged. It is one in which the social position of “great power” in global politics is in part constituted by the capacity for nuclear violence. It is a structure that asymmetrically privileges and empowers the states occupying these positions compared to the subordinate others (non-nuclear weapon states and non-permanent members of the Security Council). Structural power also captures the more specific suzerain structure of U.S. alliances within the Western sphere as a nuclear protectorate. This oligarchic nuclearsocial structure cements relations of domination and subordination between these different structural positions, notably those of: NPT nuclear weapon state and non-nuclear weapon state; the United States as nuclear patron and U.S. nuclear allies; U.S. nuclear ally and non-ally; nuclear technology exporter and nuclear importer; “legitimate” nuclear state and “illegitimate” nuclear state; and the cultural-political formation of the Western modern state and the post-colonial developing state. This structural perspective highlights how states’ capacities to act in nuclear politics are enabled and constrained by their positions in a nuclear social structure. States have, for example, little option to “opt out” of a structural position of “non-nuclear” unless they want to be branded a “rogue” or “pariah,” as Ukraine discovered in negotiating the repatriation of its Soviet legacy nuclear arsenal in the early 1990s (Budjeryn, 2015).

The oligarchic structure has a political-economic dimension as well as a political-military dimension insofar as it extends into nuclear trade and the development of national nuclear energy production complexes and markets (Berndorfer, 2009). The strategic-corporate politics of nuclear commerce has been central to the politics of nuclear control since Eisenhower’s 1953 Atoms for Peace initiative. Corporations, workforces, regulators, markets, commodities and capitalism more broadly produce a political-economic structure of nuclear goals, actors and practices (Berndorfer, 2009; Hecht, 2012; Mort, 2002). In the same way that we can talk of a global capitalist structure and its elite enacting and reproducing capitalism, we can refer to a global nuclear structure and its elite enacting and reproducing nuclearism. This is evident in the recapitalization of Cold War era nuclear weapon systems and investment in the renaissance of nuclear power.

In fact, from a Gramscian standpoint the global capitalist economy is *the* form of structural power that connects nuclear weapons and energy complexes to wider relations of militarism, capitalism and U.S. power. Kiely (2006, p. 218), for example, argues that the U.S. is constituted through the structure of capitalism as the pre-eminent military power operating on behalf of transnational capital to support a U.S.-led expansion of global capitalism and to pre-empt the re-emergence of any regional or global imperial rival (both to the United States and to neo-liberal capitalism). Gill (1986) similarly defines hegemony as “the coherence of the post-war international capitalist system as well as the centrality of the U.S. within that system” (p. 312) and notes the role of a U.S.-centered security structure in binding it together. From this perspective, global nuclear order becomes a process of managing or policing nuclear relations in ways that sustain a capitalist historical structure of globally interconnected blocs. Klein (1994), for example, argues that it was Washington’s capacity to provide a “transnational strategic architecture” (p. 101) through extended nuclear deterrence that legitimized the wider project of integrating others into a capitalist trading bloc (see also Gerson, 2007, p. 3).

Barnett and Duvall (2005, p. 53) argue that structural power does something else too: it shapes self-understandings and subjective interests in ways that can constrain actors from recognizing their own domination and unequal status leading to the acceptance and continuation of inequality and exploitation rather than resistance. This is Gramsci’s “common sense” at work whereby a set of particular nuclear preferences, ordering ideas and practices (generally those of the powerful) become accepted as general and legitimate principles of nuclear order (Craig & Ruzicka, 2013, p. 341; see also Jasper, 2016, p. 51). It is a covert form of power that operates through internal control and self-censoring and naturalizes power hierarchies and intrusive external regulation (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 54). Ikenberry and Kupchan (1990, p. 283) describe this as hegemonic control through socialization whereby actors internalize hegemonic norms and rules that are embedded in institutions and ordering ideas such that compliance becomes habitual and non-deliberative thereby enabling the reproduction of a hegemonic structure. It is the normalization of nuclear weapons and the prospect of *permanent* nuclear subordination that generated widespread resistance through the humanitarian initiative and ban treaty.

# The ban treaty and social institutions of nuclear control

The material capabilities, institutions and ordering ideas set out above constitute a historical structure of nuclear order, one that has particular structural effects. I argue that it is a *hegemonic* structure for four reasons. First, because of its endurance as a structure of power relations that has evolved over seven decades in a relatively stable and hierarchical form. Second, because it has enjoyed the widespread support of most of the world’s major powers with the exceptions of Germany and Japan in the 1960s, China until the 1990s, and India on a limited but continuing basis (Leveringhaus & Estrada, 2018).

Third, because of the central role of the United States in nuclear ordering from the early 1940s onwards as the world’s most powerful state within a set of broader hegemonic structures. Fourth, because the nuclear control order is in many ways embedded in these broader hegemonic structures of the post-1945 capitalist “international liberal order” (see Deudney, 2014, p. 197). This hegemonic structure of material capabilities, ordering ideas and institutions encompasses both an oligarchic nuclear social structure and the United States’ predominant capacity for ordering. This combination of hegemonic structure, hegemonic agency and oligarchy is not neat, but it is, I argue, a better way of capturing the power relations of global nuclear politics enabled by Cox’s framework.

This unequal and hierarchical order is regularly framed as universal, normal, and legitimate in ways that conceal its underlying power relations, as noted above. These power relations can be distilled into six core social institutions, or structural pillars, that comprise a nuclear control order or a historical nuclear structure to use Cox’s terminology. I define this as: *the set of material, institutional and discursive practices that selectively legitimize, regulate, and discipline the appropriation of nuclear technology and knowledge in ways that reflect and reproduce a structure of nuclear hierarchy in general and U.S. power and preferences in particular*. This includes the selective regulation and disciplining of nuclear weapons and nuclear energy programs and the selective legitimation of nuclear violence in the context of a wider post-1945 international order (Klein, 1994, p. 38). These institutions are quite different to William Walker’s core ordering institutions of managed nuclear deterrence, military nuclear abstinence, civil nuclear engagement and norms of reciprocal obligations based on the NPT (for a schematic see Walker, 2012, p. 123).They began to emerge in the 1960s, solidified in the 1970s and evolved further in unipolar era of the 1990s and the subsequent “global war on terror” (see Nuti, 2018, on the significance of the 1970s). Nuclear order from this perspective is not (and has not been) a process of resolving nuclear hierarchies of power but of reproducing them.

The first institution is a nuclear weapons and nuclear trade oligarchy centered on the five NPT nuclear weapon states and their positions as permanent members of the UN Security Council. This constitutes a concert of nuclear authority in which nuclear weapons are understood as a preeminent currency of geopolitical power. This concert is expressed through nuclear collusion in international institutions of nuclear order between states whose relations are often adversarial, primarily the United States and Russia.

Second, an understanding of the security of the state (and for some, the security or longevity of the post-1945 international liberal order) as necessitating a capacity for strategic nuclear violence. This is expressed through the practices and institutions of nuclear deterrence and coercion, through nuclear weapon complexes and operational nuclear weapon systems, through the planning apparatus for the actual use of nuclear weapons and execution of nuclear war plans, through the absence of meaningful plans to relinquish nuclear weapons, and through powerful discourses of nuclearism and proliferationism.

Third, a bilateral U.S.-Russia institution of competitive, limited, negotiated and verified constraints on their strategic nuclear delivery systems alongside competitive development of advanced strategic weapons and recapitalization of Cold War nuclear weapon systems. It is a system in which permanent planning for large scale nuclear war is legitimized as a mutual necessity based on the second institution. Its traditional arms control element is eroding, perhaps irrevocably with the likely demise of the INF treaty.

Fourth, a Western nuclear security community of alliances that maps on to global wealth and power in the capitalist economic system with the U.S. as nuclear patron at the core. Here, structural hierarchies of global nuclear power are nested in structural hierarchies of economic, military and political power as well as North-South trade relations, exposed by the widespread support for the ban treaty across much of the global South.

Fifth, a system of intrusive and institutionalized nuclear policing led primarily by the United States and centered on state and non-state actors and networks, often in the global South, such that it is inadvisable to confront or militarily resist the United States and wider West without nuclear weapons. This primarily targets designated “rogues”, but also proliferative entities in non-Western major powers. This system is legitimated by the NPT and discourses of nuclearism and proliferationism.

Sixth, a set of formal international institutions that are ascribed bureaucratic and moral authority to regulate civilian nuclear technologies, knowledge and practices, notably through the IAEA. This overlaps with the fifth institution and is applied selectively such that states informally have only a conditional right to extensive nuclear power programs in which a full nuclear fuel cycle may or may not be permitted.

The significance of the ban treaty is that it *explicitly* challenges this nuclear control order and the legitimacy of some (though not all) of its core social institutions because of the growing permanence of its inequalities and injustices. It is an expression of collective resistance to those aspects of nuclear hegemony, nuclear hierarchy, and practices of nuclear control that legitimize and perpetuate the existence of nuclear weapons, the practice of nuclear deterrence, and the risks of catastrophic nuclear violence (Ritchie & Egeland, 2018). The extent to which the initiative is challenging these structures of power is evidenced in the very strong reactions against it by nuclear weapon states and their supporters, not least U.S. allies. (Sengupta & Gladstone, 2017; Russian "Statement to the UN General Assembly First Committee, A/C.1/71/PV.22," 2016, October 27). They have framed the ban treaty as a radical and destabilizing move that undermines the status quo (see the Swiss Government's framing of the treaty, "Report of the Working Group to Analyse the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons," 2018, June 6, p. 9).

Nevertheless, the argument that changing nuclear politics in the ways envisaged by the ban treaty entails confrontation with a historical structure of power and hierarchy is accepted by some though by no means all in the HINW because it calls into question the notion that a nuclear weapons-free world can be achieved by exorcising nuclear weapons from current political practices whilst much else remains the same, in the way that anti-personnel landmines and cluster munitions have been prohibited and steadily eliminated for example (for an extended discussion, see Borrie, 2014).

Moreover, the initiative has not and does not challenge the hegemonic structure as a whole, and this has been a source of criticism from some that require something more transformative (e.g. Considine, 2017, p. 694; Jasper, 2016, p. 52). The NPT, for example, is considered sacrosanct by the states driving the ban treaty for two reasons, even though it is a central pillar of nuclear hierarchy. First, because the non-proliferation norm is widely accepted, valued and sustained by an NPT narrative that nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation are two sides of the same coin. Second, the legitimacy of the ban treaty rests on the NPT because it is justified as an “effective measure” under the NPT’s Article VI. As such, the hegemonic authority of the NPT is central to the ban treaty. A few scholars have argued that the NPT is outdated and should be dispensed with to enable the development of a more substantive nuclear disarmament institution, but this has yet to gain substantial political traction (Butt, 2012, December 19; Doyle, 2017; Sauer & Meyer, 2018). The extent to which the ban treaty can and will generate significant change in the global politics of nuclear weapons remains to be seen (Hanson, 2018). But if it represents a *sustained* challenge to the power structures of the global nuclear control order then it has the potential to exert a significant effect over time though the “diplomacy of resistance” (Ritchie & Egeland, 2018).

In this context, the ban treaty *is* part of a wider challenge to the core institutions of global nuclear order whether its supporters intend it to be or not insofar as it challenges the status quo. In this way, it is a source of “nuclear ordering anxiety” for supporters of the status quo along with developments such as the DPRK’s nuclear advances, the threat to the U.S.-Russia INF treaty and future nuclear arms reductions, and the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran. For many Western states structurally empowered by the nuclear control order, this anxiety has been rolled into a wider concern that the basic values and institutions of “international liberal order” are under threat (see Porter, 2018, June 5).

However, these expressions of nuclear ordering anxiety tend to conflate the status quo with order understood as compliance with established rules. This legitimizes the power relations and goals underpinning those rules precisely because they are seen to constitute “order”. Nuclear hierarchies are reproduced when order defined as specific rule compliant behavior is framed as progressive and rule contestation is framed as regressive and disorderly (for example Walker, 2012, p. 3). This sidelines wider questions of justice, equality and resistance that have underpinned the humanitarian initiative (Muller, 2010). Walker’s analysis of nuclear order veers toward this order-as-selective rule compliance model, as do those that use his framework (e.g. Harnisch, 2014; Horsburgh, 2015). It also misses how structural power fixes srelations of domination that shape what counts as order in terms of meaningful practices and social goals.

# Conclusion

This article has developed a critical conception of global nuclear order and the ban treaty by placing power and hegemony at the center of the analysis. The core argument is that global nuclear order constitutes a hegemonic order to control nuclear weapons and energy complexes based on Cox’s conception of hegemony as a fit between material capabilities, ordering ideas, and institutions that interact reciprocally as a historical structure, one in which U.S. power is central but not reducible to it.This hegemonic nuclear control order privileges a quite specific set of identities, interests, understandings, and practices in the global politics of nuclear weapons whilst dismissing or sidelining others. These are then distilled into six core institutions that constitute a hegemonic nuclear order. It is this hegemonic structure of power against which the ban treaty is pitched in a much more direct confrontation than previous disarmament initiatives *because* of its explicit aim of delegitimizing and stigmatizing nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence.

Gramsci would recognize this as an act of “counter-hegemony”: an active process to build an alternative form of politics within the structures of the established hegemony and thereby enable radical change. This means “creating alternative institutions and alternative intellectual resources within existing society” like the HINW and the ban treaty and forging connections between like-minded subordinate groups (Cox, 1983, p. 165). It is the dialectic between established structures of power in the global politics of nuclear weapons and the humanitarian initiative as a form of collective resistance that has brought the structure of nuclear hegemony to the fore and necessitated a more critical engagement with the concept of global nuclear order.

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1. Ambassador Steffan Kongstad was Director General at the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and instrumental in the success of both the CCM and the HINW as well as the Mine Ban Treaty in 1997. On the CCM, see (Borrie, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The materiality of nuclear order encompasses bombs, warheads, missiles, submarines, aircraft, command and control infrastructures, laboratories, factories, universities, think-tanks, reactors, fissile materials, mines, etc. I exceptionalize nuclear weapons as *the* material manifestation of global nuclear politics in the context of power, hegemony and nuclear order whilst acknowledging that what counts as “nuclear” is a political move (Hecht, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)