


Review as Ritual: Maintaining and Disrupting Nuclear Deterrence through the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Review Process

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The article uses ritual action as an approach to analyze the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and its review process as (1) claims of providing solutions to problems that involve liminal boundaries and uncontrollable forces (nuclear war), (2) rooted in expert diplomatic practice (regime formation), (3) identifying evil and providing boundaries to it (securitization), and (4) reifying social processes and political structures (international stratification). The argument is that the ritual of the NPT review is involved in maintaining the nuclear order that has sets of norms, values, and social institutions, yet has also opened a new venue for disrupting the sacrosanct status of nuclear deterrence. The NPT's review ritual has worked to internalize deterrence, strategic stability, and incremental disarmament as the only "realistic" approach to nuclear weapon possession in addition to professing the norm of non-proliferation as an unassailable public good. At the same time, the ritual provides for a glimpse of the possible through article VI of the NPT that commits nuclear weapon states to disarmament. This is the unattainable that saves the face of those in a subjugated position in the hierarchy established by the treaty. The article shows how the high politics world of nuclear diplomacy is not immune or devoid of things like emotion management or the maintenance of identities and social orders. Indeed, many human actions contain both ritual and instrumental elements, and one can mask as the other, which I argue to be the case with deterrence policies and practices.

El artículo utiliza la acción ritual como un enfoque para analizar el Tratado sobre la No Proliferación de las Armas Nucleares (TNP), así como su proceso de revisión como 1) afirmaciones capaces de proporcionar soluciones a problemas que involucran límites liminales y fuerzas incontrolables (guerra nuclear), 2) arraigadas en la práctica diplomática experta (formación de régimen), 3) que identifican el mal y le ponen límites (securitización), y 4) reifican procesos sociales y estructuras políticas (estratificación internacional). La hipótesis es que el ritual de revisión del TNP está involucrado en el mantenimiento del orden nuclear, que cuenta con un conjunto de normas, valores e instituciones sociales, pero que también ha abierto una nueva vía para alterar el estatus sacrosanto de la disuasión nuclear. El ritual de revisión del TNP ha funcionado para interiorizar la disuasión, la estabilidad estratégica y el desarme incremental como el único enfoque «realista» para la posesión de armas nucleares, además de profesar la norma de no proliferación como un bien público incuestionable. Al mismo tiempo, el ritual permite vislumbrar lo posible a través del artículo VI del TNP, que compromete al desarme a aquellos Estados que cuentan con armas nucleares. Esto es lo inalcanzable, que salva el honor de aquellos en una posición subyugada en la jerarquía establecida por el tratado. El artículo muestra cómo el mundo de la alta política de la diplomacia nuclear no es inmune ni carece de elementos, tales como la gestión de emociones o el mantenimiento de identidades y órdenes sociales. De hecho, muchas acciones humanas contienen tanto elementos rituales como instrumentales, y uno puede disfrazarse del otro, lo cual consideramos que ocurre con las políticas y prácticas de disuasión.

L'article emploie l'action rituelle comme approche afin d'analyser le Traité de non-prolifération des armes nucléaires (TNP) et son processus d'examen par rapport aux points suivants : 1) fourniture de solutions aux problèmes impliquant des frontières liminales et des forces incontrôlables (guerre nucléaire), 2) ancrage dans la pratique diplomatique experte (formation de régimes), 3) identification du mal et apport de limites pour le contenir (sécuritisation), et 4) réification des processus sociaux et structures politiques (stratification internationale). L'argument est le suivant : le rituel de l'examen du TNP intervient dans le maintien de l'ordre nucléaire qui a défini des normes, valeurs et institutions sociales, mais il donne également l'occasion de remettre en question le caractère sacro-saint de la dissuasion nucléaire. Le rituel d'examen du TNP a contribué à internaliser la dissuasion, la stabilité stratégique et le désarmement progressif comme seule approche « réaliste » de la possession de l'arme nucléaire, en plus de proclamer la norme de non-prolifération comme un bien public irréfutable. Cependant, le rituel donne un aperçu du possible par le biais de l'article VI du TNP par lequel les États dotés de l'arme nucléaire s'engagent au désarmement. Il s'agit du point inatteignable qui sauve la face des pays en position subjuguée dans la hiérarchie établie par le traité. L'article montre que le monde de la haute politique en diplomatie nucléaire n'est pas à l'abri ou exempt de questions tels la gestion des émotions ou le maintien des identités et des ordres sociaux. En effet, nombre d'actions humaines comportent des éléments rituels comme instrumentaux, et l'on peut les confondre, ce qui j'affirme est le cas à l'endroit des politiques et pratiques de dissuasion.

Keywords: nuclear deterrence; non-proliferation; ritual; disruption; disarmament..

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Introduction

The nuclear order (Walker 2000) comprises of physical things like nuclear weapons and their delivery platforms, but also sets of norms, values, and social institutions. The possession of nuclear weapons is often justified with the deterrent effects they are thought to bring about¹ (e.g., Brodie 1965, 273), which makes the practices and policies of nuclear deterrence vital parts of the order too. Another important part is the non-proliferation regime, which comprises of multiple treaties and institutions that regulate state behavior in the field of nuclear technology by allowing for peaceful uses of it while curbing its military applications to the five recognized Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) (Süvari and Nas 2022). Such elements of the order work toward alleviating unease about the unintended consequences of nuclear deterrence efforts. The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) is considered to be the cornerstone of the nuclear non-proliferation regime.

While the NPT has been studied from many theoretical viewpoints in a thorough manner, its review process has not been considered in terms of ritual action. Within the study of psychology, people are considered to display ritual behaviors when the causal chains of their actions are not clear (Whitehouse 2023). When consistent and repeated, such behavior can be considered to have become ritualized (Bell 1990), which in turn enables ritual action within institutions. Rituals are repeated and simplified forms of episodic cultural communication, where the participants share beliefs in the validity of the symbolic contents of the communication. When effective, this energizes participants and strengthens their social cohesion as well as their identification with the symbolic aspects of the communication. (Alexander 2004, 527.) Despite their usefulness, reliance on rituals is a double-edged matter for their users. This is because rituals may open up the order they support for symbolic resistance, making their political use of keen scholarly interest. Indeed, the neglect of ritual action and behavior in the NPT review process represents an omission in regard to gaining full comprehension of the socio-psychological elements involved in how this part of the nuclear order is legitimated and maintained.

Framing the NPT in terms of ritualization and ritual action aids us in identifying the social and psychological dynamics involved in its persistence despite its apparent failures. Accordingly, I show in the present article how the NPT review process in part works to enable the legitimacy of nuclear deterrence as an institutionalized strategic practice along with a hierarchical nuclear deterrence order. I also show how the Humanitarian Initiative within the review process and the subsequent Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) outside of it disrupted the ritual. The concern for “the catastrophic humanitarian consequences that would result from the use of nuclear weapons” (United Nations Digital Library 2010) in the final document of the 2010 NPT review represented a new context for discussing nuclear weapons within large state conferences (Hanson 2018, 469). It brought humanitarian language into official NPT documents (Gibbons 2018, 17). Furthermore, I argue that because deterrence is causally opaque in that no-one knows how the “magic” of deterrence works (Freedman 2004, 13), nuclear deterrence practice is based on ritual action rather than instrumental rationality as its operators would claim. Subsequently, in the NPT review too, rather than instrumental rationality, the problem of nuclear annihilation is dealt with

through ritual action that supports the dominant position of NWS and enables their practice of nuclear deterrence.

I analyze the NPT review ritual in terms of four aspects that have been identified as key elements of institutionalized ritual action (cf., Benford and Kurtz 1987): rituals as (1) claims of providing solutions to problems that involve liminal boundaries and uncontrollable forces (nuclear war), (2) rooted in expert diplomatic practice (regime formation), (3) identifying evil and providing boundaries to it (securitization), and (4) reifying social processes and political structures (international stratification). Examining such features elucidates the symbolic underpinnings of both deterrence and the legitimation of the NPT. Overall, humans use rituals to express and affirm shared values (Bell 1997) as well as to socially construct responses for dealing with crises and uncontrollable forces both on an individual and collective level (Benford and Kurtz 1987). This tends to become formalized and public in various degrees that can range from intimate familial contexts to religious events that are attended remotely on a global scale. Such ritualization produces a shared sense of reality within social institutions (Bell 1997). Ritualization maintains social institutions, yet can also conversely enable disruptions to the status quo of social orders (Tavory and Haynes 2025).

In the nuclear order, the NPT and its review process have displayed both of these elements that ritualization enables. First, from the viewpoint of ritualization as institution maintenance, the NPT review makes its “participants internalize and profess what is valued” (Kulkarni 2020, 159), that is, internalize deterrence, strategic stability, and incremental disarmament as the only “realistic” approach to nuclear weapon possession in addition to professing the norm of non-proliferation as an unassailable public good. The ritualization of non-proliferation and disarmament paradoxically work to maintain the nuclear order akin to how ritualization operates in many other aspects of social life and its social orders: the review ritual legitimates nuclear deterrence and the inequality of nuclear possession by promising to contain the nuclear chaos that would ensue without the NPT. This element was particularly strongly evident in the acrimony over the permanent extension of the treaty in 1995 (Craig and Ruzicka 2013, 333–334), and the NWS have deployed various diplomatic means to achieve it (Gibbons 2022).

Secondly, while my argument here is that the review ritual of the NPT has worked to maintain the nuclear order, the Humanitarian Initiative (United Nations Digital Library 2010) shows how the first type of ritualization can also be undermined from within. This initiative disrupted the ritual of providing a backstop for deterrence by aiming to delegitimize nuclear possession and thereby take away the claimed means of producing nuclear deterrence. This disruption eventually resulted in the establishment of another institution that works counter to the maintenance of the legitimacy of nuclear deterrence through the prohibition of nuclear weapons in the form of the TPNW (United Nations Digital Library 2017). Indeed, beyond strengthening social cohesion, rituals can also provide for glimpses of possibilities and alternatives to what currently is, they are both integrative and disruptive by producing a social order while glimpsing what could be beyond it (Tavory and Haynes 2025, 53, 57).

Ritual action is an approach that has not yet been widely deployed to examine the nuclear order (Bradford and Kurtz 1987; Mälksoo 2021). In the present article, I argue that the ritualization of the NPT review is one tool in the upkeep of general and internalized deterrence. At the same time, the approach of ritual action in the study of the NPT review connects the seemingly exceptional and distant practices like

¹The Department will continue to modernize our nuclear forces, the ultimate backstop to deter attacks on the homeland” (U.S. Department of Defence 2022, 9).

nuclear diplomacy to how human social structures and orders are produced in human behaviors closer to most people. Concomitantly, a ritual approach opens up the ostensibly rational and commonsensical to an anthropological investigation that points out the elements of emotion management present even in interstate relations. The ritual of the NPT review enables diplomats to go on without having to consider the terror of nuclear apocalypse every time there is a contention in international affairs; they can feel that they are “in control” (cf., Cohn 1987, 717). At the same time, the general public around the world can rest assured that those participating in the rituals know what they are doing, and can carry on while keeping calm.

Emotions have been part of how psychological approaches to deterrence have criticized the assumption of a rational actor model as the basis for most theories of deterrence. The emphasis here has been on individual political decision makers and how emotions can affect their (mis)perceptions (Jervis et al. 1985). More recently, research has pointed to how features of the brain can make deterrence decision makers psychopathic, thus rendering an assumption of universally operating rationality false and dangerous (Thayer 2007). In contrast, emotion management does not concern individual decision makers and their decisions, but social-psychology and techniques with which large groups of people are thought to be affected in terms of “emotion work” (Perry 2002). State communication can work toward emotional fomentation, but it can also aim to provide assurance away from the crippling effect of terror.

While the destructive power of nuclear weapons produces awe, its limitation in the form of not actually using them, and curtailment in the form of denying their possession beyond a small number of great powers have ritualistic aspects to them. This first element is present in the periodical word-magic that NWS leaders have deployed ever since Gorbachev and Reagan voiced the view that “nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought” (Joint Soviet-United States Statement 1985), most recently on the eve of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Joint Statement 2022). Some see the lack of nuclear use since Hiroshima and Nagasaki as a process of learning not to use such weapons first that become enshrined into a taboo (Tannenwald 2007; Eden 2010) or a tradition of non-use (Paul 2009). Nevertheless, the majority view on the reason for the non-use of nuclear weapons is their deterrent effect (Waltz 1981). Irrespective of which reason is considered to hold here,² the exhortations of nuclear states’ leaders are part of nuclear rituals. Indeed, both the establishment and maintenance of taboos or traditions rely on ritual, and even deterrence can be viewed in its terms (Mälksoo 2021). Accordingly, the belief in the effectiveness of deterrence has been viewed as akin to having religious faith (Schell 1984, 65). Such beliefs make nuclear weapons objects of “sacred value” that have both positive value as symbols of ultimate power and negative value as endangering the existence of states or even humanity (cf., Goffman 1953, 64).

The second element of curtailment is most prominently present in the NPT that works against the spread of nuclear weapons. Membership in the treaty represents restraint on the part of Non-Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) (Ruzicka 2018, 375), while the treaty and the subsequent non-proliferation regime can be included among the ways the US “strategy of inhibition” has been operationalized (Gavin 2015). The pe-

riodical review conferences of the treaty work toward sustaining the nuclear order perpetually, yet perennially fail to achieve nuclear disarmament. The ritual action approach provides for clarity in discerning political elements in how social orders are maintained. Indeed, the NPT has for example been viewed as enabling nuclear weapon possession for the five NWS identified in the treaty (Panico 2022). To support the goal of non-proliferation, some NWS have given guarantees of extended deterrence to reduce the need for an autonomous nuclear deterrent. Such a dependency also supports the continued existence of nuclear weapons (Craig and Ruzicka 2013, 340; Ruzicka 2018, 380). Concomitantly, there have been calls to study the embeddedness of the seeming irreversibility of nuclear possession more deeply (Walker 2020). To answer such calls, I examine the NPT review process here in terms of ritual action. From this point of view, the ritual of the review process plays a part in keeping up and legitimating nuclear deterrence and weapon possession, and subsequently, its disruptions are a way to undermine the legitimacy of nuclear possession.

I begin the article with a brief introduction of ritual as an approach to examining the NPT that is followed by a discussion of critical deterrence studies and how the ritual approach relates to it. I then analyze the NPT review process in terms of ritualization as institution maintenance that facilitates deterrence, and then how this was disrupted by the Humanitarian Initiative. My conclusions draw the article to a close.

Ritual Action as an Approach to Studying the Nuclear Order

Mainstream approaches to IR have argued that the establishment of the NPT concurs with the general ways they conceive of international institutionalization and cooperation overall. For example, Davis (1993, 79) argues that the NPT is explained by classical realism and that there is no need “to venture beyond the bounds of traditional realism to explain proliferation or its counterpart nonproliferation.” For Paul (2003), systemic factors and actor interests are the main contributors to the establishment and maintenance of the NPT. Gibbons (2022) emphasizes the hegemonic role of the USA in widening the membership in the treaty as well as its indefinite extension. Learning and knowledge have also been viewed as crucial in bringing the NPT about (Smith 1987).

Mainstream ways of viewing international regimes in general (Hasenclever et al. 1997), and non-proliferation in particular (Süvari and Nas 2022) have been categorized as power-based (realism), cognition-based (constructivism), and interest-based (institutionalism) approaches. I argue that the ritual action approach in the study of the nuclear order can function as a bridge for bringing these various ways of viewing the NPT together. The ritual action approach provides for a fuller comprehension of the social-psychological elements involved in how the nuclear order is legitimated and maintained. Ritual elements are not the only way that the NPT and the nuclear order overall are kept up, yet the picture of the dynamics involved remains incomplete without thinking them through ritual action.

The mainstream view of the NPT regime can be paraphrased through the three main viewpoints on regime formation and maintenance. Power-based approaches point to how the NPT was a way for the great powers, i.e., the five NWS to maintain the status quo and its power-distribution indefinitely (e.g., Paul 2003). This approach has difficulties with explaining why NWS remain within the treaty and do not develop their own nuclear weapons (Süvari and Nas 2022). Indeed, while nuclear threshold states within the NPT have

²In any case, both practitioners’ comments like those of Robert McNamara, and nuclear scholarship (Pelopidas 2015, 14) have shown that it was not rationality, but luck that saved humanity during the many nuclear close calls throughout history.

been the target of severe sanctions and even military action (e.g., Iraq and Iran), states that have developed nuclear weapons outside of the NPT have not faced similar action (Israel, India, Pakistan, and North-Korea).

In turn, cognition based approaches tend to point to the presentation of nuclear weapons as a threat to humanity (Vuori 2010), which is also stated in the NPT text. Countering this threat is the foundational basis of the “idea of nuclear disarmament” (Cottrell 2016). While this is a key point of most anti-nuclear movements, and has been a stated motivating factor for suggested and realized nuclear regulation proposals (e.g., Nuclear Weapon Free Zones; NWFZ), not all states are uniform in whether and how nuclear weapons are securitized either as national threats or threats to humanity (Vuori 2024).

Finally, utility-based approaches point to the utility both NWS and NWS get from the NPT. From this viewpoint, as rational actors, NWS accept the stratified nature of the NPT because they get benefits from accepting it: NWS are able to legitimate their weapon possession, NWS can use civilian nuclear technology, and NWS commit to eventual disarmament. This “grand bargain” is used by both practitioners and utility-based approaches to explain why NWS accept their subordinate position, as for example stated in the first United Nations Special Session on Disarmament: in addition to allowing for civilian uses of nuclear technology, “the goal of nuclear non-proliferation is on the one hand to prevent the emergence of any additional nuclear-weapon States besides the existing five nuclear-weapon States, and on the other progressively to reduce and eventually eliminate nuclear weapons altogether” (UNSSOD-I 1978, para. 65). However, this explanation is continually weakened because only about fifty states use civilian nuclear technologies, and the proportion of nuclear energy in energy production has been reducing globally for decades being at around 10 percent in 2025. Furthermore, not all NWS are covered by NWS’s extended deterrence guarantees that have also been seen as a utility for some NWS.

As ritual action concerns both consent and resistance, it cannot be disassociated from power relations and their operation (Kustermans et al. 2022, 4). Distinguishing between ritual and institutional elements is difficult if not impossible in empirical terms, as rituals become institutionalized and elemental parts of practices within institutions (Benford and Kurtz 1987, 469). At the same time, this difficulty makes ritualization relevant for the study of international relations. In regard to mainstream approaches in the field, ritualization can be viewed closest to constructivism that has also explored ceremony and ritual (Onuf 1989, 105–108). Yet, the ritual approach is not limited to speech acts or the construction of norms or institutions. While ritual is repetitive, adheres to formalities, and takes place within institutions, it is more than institutionalization or the construction of social realities. Similarly, while rituals can be habitual and deploy habits, a ritual approach differs from the study of everyday practices in IR in that it is not concerned with habitual routines in the everyday (Kustermans et al. 2022, 5).

The notion of ritual action is neutral in that it can support various kinds of values that are legitimated in a particular community and its institutions. This means that the contents of rituals can be analytically separated from the form they take. (Benford and Kurtz 1987, 464–465.) Accordingly, I consider the NPT review process a genre of ritual action that is part of the larger nuclear order. While other parts of this order and its institutions also include ritualized aspects, like arms-racing (Benford and Kurtz 1987) and deterrence (Mälksoo 2021), my focus here is on how the ritualization

of the NPT review has been complicit in the continued enabling of nuclear deterrence practice, and how the Humanitarian Initiative and the TPNW disturbed this ritual. The key distinction of ritual action in regard to many mainstream approaches for the argument here is that it is not instrumentally causal³ (Whitehouse 2023), or, in IR terminology, based on an assumption of “rational actors.” Indeed, while rationalist approaches to IR identify adherence in the form of “symbolic obeisance” (Lake 2009, 12), the ritual approach views ritual adherence in terms of social psychology rather than rational interest.

Within social psychology, “ritual behavior” affects group loyalties and is part of the sociocultural complexity of human existence. Psychological experiments have shown that when children are shown elaborate procedures for handling objects before either placing them into a box (instrumental condition) or returning them to as they were (ritual condition) results in closer imitated adherence to the complex behavior in handling the items when they are not put into the box. Having no clear purpose for the shown behavior is considered to be more ritual-like, even though both results of the behavior had instrumentally unnecessary actions; the instrumental condition resulted in more novel behavior and less adherence to the shown actions in the children. (Whitehouse 2023, 118.)

According to Whitehouse (2023, 116), ritual behavior is a human psychological feature for imitating causally opaque behavior in order to affiliate with a group. Human actions can be quite efficient when their causal chains are clear. This is because superfluous motions and behavior is removed or minimized in order to achieve the intended goal with minimal effort. When dealing with causally opaque phenomenon though, humans perform seemingly superfluous behaviors all the time. When an ordinary causal chain is unclear, habits, conventions, traditions, doctrines, and even magical beliefs come into play. When consistent and repeated, such behavior can be considered to be ritualized (Bell 1990). Accordingly, causal reasoning does not apply to the idea of ritual: irresolvable causal opacity makes human action more about rule adherence than efficiency (Whitehouse 2023, 117). Like with the general reification of social realities, those engaged in ritualized practices tend to forget that the ritual is human action, and that as such it is not the only available option for solving the crisis or liminal boundary the ritual purports to deal with (Benford and Kurtz 1987, 475).

Many human actions contain both ritual and instrumental elements, and one can mask as the other (Whitehouse 2023, 117). Indeed, rituals are a form of institutionalized problem solving and can involve habitual responses in dealing with the problem they are maintaining to solve (Benford and Kurtz 1987, 468). Even though the link between ritual actions and their declared goals is causally opaque, ritual behavior can work toward salient goals, which can be shown to have been achieved post hoc (Whitehouse 2023, 119). This is a vital feature of medical quackery, but can also be said to maintain belief in the efficiency of particular nuclear deterrence practices, artifacts, and policies. If there is no nuclear aggression, the deterrent “waving of a feather” at the putative challenger keeps doing its magic. Despite the causal opacity of things like deterrence, rituals are perceived as verifiable be-

³Instrumental causality refers here to known causal mechanisms and chains, where a certain action is thought to consistently bring about a consistent outcome, i.e., what Kurki (2008) calls push-pull causality. I view ritual action in regard to nuclear deterrence in the present article in Kurki’s terms of “constraining and enabling” causality: the ritual of the NPT review can be listed among causal factors that enable nuclear weapon states to justify nuclear weapon possession and thereby retain their backstop of deterrence with lessened reputational costs.

cause they are rooted in the experience (Benford and Kurtz 1987, 468) of those involved in the practice.

All societies require some form of ritual, like voting in elections, to provide people with a sense of their participation in society: all polities require some degree of acquiescence in order to survive (Edelman 1972, 3). This makes ceremonies and rituals an important entry-point for the study of political institutions on any level of social organization (Rai 2010). Rituals can take on the form of political spectacles that can be on a massive or majestic scale in order to emphasize the difference between the mundanity of everyday life and the importance of the political ritual. The artificial settings of such spectacles facilitate audiences' concentration on suggestions, connotations, emotions, and authority (Edelman 1972, 96). Rituals interpellate social distinctions within institutional ideologies (Kulkarni 2020, 160). This enables transformations of roles, statuses, and social positions (Turner 1969). Accordingly, rituals can affect emotional energies, engender solidarity, symbolize social relationships, and underline moral standards (Collins 2004, 48). They constitute and are constituted by social relations and the circulation of power (Rai 2010, 284). Rituals in the nuclear realm entail the most majestic scale imaginable: the real possibility of ending human civilization.

Ritualized political spectacles create and circulate symbols in political processes, whereby politics appears as a drama where meaning is conferred through crisis situations, emergencies, rituals, and myths. These form a moving panorama of a world that the mass public never really touches, but which can have major effects on their daily lives, and which they have to fear or cheer. (Edelman 1972.) Rituals are also a way to participate in imagined communities, like one's nation (Rai 2010, 286; Kulkarni 2020), or the community of those responsible for curtailing the spread of nuclear weapons and maintaining strategic balance. Indeed, rituals can be found in the most intimate situations that relate to procreation and progeny, or in settings that pertain to peace and war between states (Alexander 2004, 527; Kulkarni 2020).

Accordingly, major international state summits can be viewed as ritual spaces or arenas for embodying the abstract international (Kustermans et al. 2022, 6). As one such arena, the NPT review ritual makes non-proliferation, deterrence, and NWS palpable and palatable, and in this sense "real" for the participants in the ritual action. Rituals can "bring down" abstract notions like deterrence and non-proliferation; ritual domesticates, translates, and "makes real" abstract ordering principles and imaginaries (Svensson 2022, 17). Few people, even among those engaged in non-proliferation practice, have personal experience of nuclear weapons or their effects. Nevertheless, such weapons, their physical features, and effects have to appear real and immediate when engaging in the practices of their governance (Benford and Kurtz 1987, 465). Distance to such prized objects tends to enhance the value of rituals that enable the imagination of the "real" (Lifton 1982a, 1982b). Engaging in joint ritual action makes the adherents participants in the practice of non-proliferation, and by extension of nuclear deterrence.

In terms of being solutions to social crises, rituals relieve both psychological and social tensions by directing attentive focus on the details of the ritual rather than the aspects of the particular crisis beyond participants' control. In terms of emotion management, the ritual connects its activities to world views and rationalizations that ease the participants away from the angst related to the crisis. A focus on details also affords a sense of security. (Benford and Kurtz 1987, 465–466.) Rather than dwelling on the prospect of nuclear annihilation, the NPT review provides for opportuni-

ties to engage with technical details, to say and do "something" about things that need to be done. This acknowledges the existence of the crisis or liminal boundary yet does not exacerbate it.

The half-century of the review ritual has codified what are considered appropriate behaviors within the realism of the process. The extension of the NPT to having no end-point combined with the lack of disarmament by the NWS can be considered analogous to the experiment with children imitating complex behaviors in placing items into a box: a multitude of superfluous activities in the NPT review cycle is adhered to by its participants even though the objects could instrumentally just be put in the box as the NWS have agreed to do in the treaty text. Rather than finding new instrumental ways to achieve disarmament, the participants adhere to the "realism" of the review ritual. The prospect of nuclear annihilation remains (the items stay on the table rather than be put into the box), but the review ritual gives something to do that is within the control of the participants.

Ritualization generates privileged dispositions from which practices can be engendered that appear to restructure the cultural milieu. The ritualized person can dominate sociocultural situations through the strategic schemes the ritualization enables. (Bell 1990, 304–305.) Rituals can play with what is and what is hoped for, actuality and possibility, in effect the real and the unattainable (Stephenson 2015, 26). Rituals can enable transformation or becoming, but they can also concern a world or social life as it could be (Tavory and Hoynes 2025). The NPT too concerns both the real in terms of nuclear possession, yet also has elements that seem unattainable despite the wording of the treaty text: nuclear abolishment and the impossibility of nuclear war. Indeed, while many religious rituals concern the unattainable of otherworldly realms, the liminal moment of nuclear war is quite attainable.

Some threats come to be shared universally and thus are claimed to have the same consequences for everyone (Edelman 1972, 14–15). The wide public processes that these types of threats are constructed by make it very difficult to react to them in any other way than as threats; threats will be the focus of attention whether the media is controlled by private interests or propaganda ministries. An example of such a threat is nuclear proliferation: other remedies than the NPT and the maintenance of nuclear deterrence are not considered to be within the realm of possibility. Indeed, non-proliferation has received an unassailable position of a global public good that provides the NPT with a sacrosanct position as the guarantor of controlling the spread of nuclear weapons (Craig and Ruzicka 2013, 340). Concomitantly, the norm of non-proliferation is among the most fundamental of the order of global power (Ruzicka 2018, 382). Accordingly, the NPT review ritual aims to produce deterrence and non-proliferation as "unavoidable subordinate goals to nuclear war avoidance" (Pelopidas 2016, 329). From such a viewpoint, the NPT is a backstop for guaranteeing the permanence of nuclear deterrence and maintaining the image of its effectiveness.

Critical Deterrence Studies and Ritual Action

In nuclear discourse, threats are used "to manipulate behavior so that something unwanted does not occur" (Morgan 2003, 1). Such threats are denoted as deterrence, which refers to the prevention of aggression (Freedman 2004). Deterrence is considered a coercive strategy (Morgan 2003; Freedman 2004, 26–27): the point is that A dissuades B from doing something due to either immediate deterrence (in the form

of explicit threats), general deterrence (in the form of the context of international politics), or internalized deterrence (in the form of norms and incentive structures) (Freedman 2004). Ritualization in the context of the NPT concerns aspects of deterrence that fall into the categories of general and internalized deterrence. Indeed, deterrence does not require explicit threats with specified outcomes each and every time (Freedman 2004, 31). Deterrence can also be implied, or be achieved indirectly through the reliance on a relevant background that ritualized actions and practices maintain.

The first three waves of deterrence studies drew from rational choice theory and psychology regarding decision making. The current fourth wave of deterrence studies focuses on the discursive aspects of deterrence and views its policies, practices, and artifacts through a social lens (Lupovici 2010). In this vein of the literature, inter-subjective contexts are thought to matter to a much greater extent than abstract models devised by game theorists. This kind of research concerns identities, norms, and threat constructions. Accordingly, the fourth wave of deterrence studies considers deterrence as more of a learned practice and a set of institutions and rules than a rational calculation. Deterrence speech can become so institutionalized that it becomes part of a state's self-identity, and deterrence failures become sources of ontological insecurity (Lupovici 2016). Like other forms of politics, deterrence is viewed as a social construct and a social text.

The highlighting of the linguistic, textual, and communicative qualities of deterrence is used in such approaches as a way to create a critical space from which to question the sacrosanct, immune (Joenniemi 1989, 45), if not religious (Lebow 2005, 765), position deterrence had gained as both a concept and a policy. Indeed, criticism of deterrence has often been accused of promoting insecurity, disorder, and social crises as well as uncontrolled violence and chaos (Joenniemi 1989, 45). Critical Deterrence Studies works against the tendency for self-censorship among nuclear deterrence and non-proliferation scholars that such accusations have worked to produce (Pelopidas 2016).

A critical approach to nuclear weapon practices like deterrence and non-proliferation examines their politics rather than seeks to find better ways of describing them or effectuating them. This type of scholarship does not abide accusations of being unrealistic, naïve, or utopian, or that uncovering the politics of deterrence would be dangerous (Pelopidas 2016, 329). The NPT review process and the connected profession of non-proliferation has fostered cynicism toward other avenues for preventing nuclear war than the "realism" of incremental disarmament within the NPT process (Craig and Ruzicka 2013, 337, 341). In contrast, the critical approach in regard to deterrence (and non-proliferation when it enables and maintains deterrence) is akin to how security is approached in its critical study: there should be skepticism and cynicism toward deterrence claims rather than blind acceptance of the performative power of deterrent speech (Vuori 2016). Indeed, nuclear weapons are laden with meanings, and they operate as fetishized sign commodities in the political economy of defense (Harrington 2009). Nuclear possession is a major part of states' identities (Walker 2020).

Deterrence speech and communication take place at various sites, stages, settings, and forums: deterrence policies, practices, and artifacts are discussed in technocratic, scientific, popular, and elite settings. Visible actions and implicit threats have also been considered vital in signaling deterrence (Rhodes 1989). The multiplicity of deterrence communication makes it difficult to know what actually produces successful deterrence, and opens up many opportunities for

miscommunication and misunderstanding (Freedman 2004, 28, 57; Lebow 2005, 767). Indeed, one person's reassurance can be another's threat (Edelman 1972, 13). This is why it has been necessary to have general and internalized forms of deterrence too in order to maintain the belief in their utility. In the end though, no-one knows how the "magic" of deterrence works (Freedman 2004, 13).

From a ritual point of view, the NPT and its review process appears as one way to communicate commitment to general and internal deterrence: the treaty interpellates the identities of those in charge of maintaining strategic balance and nuclear annihilation at bay through it, and those who have been anointed to refrain from developing such weapons that could jeopardize either the strategic balance or the prevention of nuclear war. The review process of the NPT provides for a repetitive institution that works to maintain these interpellations and provides for a glimpse into what could be, yet what at the same time remains unattainable: a world where nuclear weapons have been fully disarmed.

Indeed, nuclear powers viewed the NPT as legitimating their nuclear possession through its article IX, which in turn buttressed their deterrence policies as the retention of such weapons was guaranteed: "For the purposes of this Treaty, a nuclear-weapon State is one which has manufactured and exploded a nuclear weapon or other nuclear explosive device prior to 1 January 1967" (United Nations Office of Disarmament Affairs 2015). This element is on full display in the shared statements of the five NPT-recognized NWS that emphasize the importance of maintaining strategic balance (e.g., U.S. Department of State 2015): the NWS are committed to the goals of the NPT "in a way that promotes international stability, peace, and security, and based on the principle of increased and undiminished security for all. We continue to believe that an incremental, step-by-step approach is the only practical option for making progress towards nuclear disarmament, while upholding global strategic security and stability" (U.S. Department of State 2015).

While NWS have operationalized strategic stability in different ways (Cameron 2025), the concept has been adopted as a shared one for their joint statements, which show how rituals can have the capacity to close off other possible meanings and frames (Rai 2010, 291). Concomitantly, the NPT, the norm of non-proliferation, and the professions of disarmament diplomacy as well as non-proliferation research all maintain the permanence, entrenchment, and "realism" in regard to the existence of nuclear weapons (Walker 2000; Craig and Ruzicka 2013, 337; Ruzicka 2018, 380).

Analyzing the NPT Review as Ritualized Institution Maintenance

I will now turn to analyze the NPT review as ritualized institution maintenance in terms of the four key elements of institutionalized ritual action: claims of resolving liminal boundaries and uncontrollable forces, pre-existing forms of expert diplomatic practice, the identification of evil and its boundaries, and the reification of social processes and political structures (Benford and Kurtz 1987). I begin with how the NPT was established as a solution for resolving the liminal boundary and uncontrollable force that nuclear war represented in the thermonuclear age.

The most effective causal path to achieving the impossibility of nuclear war would be to have complete nuclear disarmament followed by measures for making rearmament impossible. The early nuclear age saw proposals for causally removing the threat of nuclear war: the Baruch plan (Baruch 1946) and the Gromyko plan (Gromyko 1946). The Baruch

plan would have placed nuclear weapons and technology under the control of a strong international body: “the only complete protection for the civilized world from the destructive use of scientific knowledge lies in the prevention of war. . . . The bomb does not wait upon debate. To delay may be to die” (Baruch 1946). The Gromyko plan would have destroyed the existing weapons and then put international authority in place. As the Cold War went into full effect at the time of these proposals, neither was seriously considered (Gerber 1982). Instead, NWS relied on deterrence after the Soviet Union became the second state to have nuclear weapons.

The Non-Proliferation Treaty aimed to limit NWS to the five that had conducted tests before its negotiation. When its review conferences are able to form a “final document,” they usually begin with the affirmation of the first element: “The Conference reaffirms that the full and effective implementation of the Treaty and the regime of non-proliferation in all its aspects has a vital role in promoting international peace and security” (United Nations Digital Library 2000). The threat of existing nuclear weapons is also often maintained: “The Conference expresses its deep concern at the continued risk for humanity represented by the possibility that these nuclear weapons could be used” (United Nations Digital Library 2000).

In terms of the second element of the framework, while the NPT that was opened for signatures 1968 and came into force in 1970 took a different approach to the initial proposals for how to govern nuclear weapons internationally, it was based on expert diplomatic experience and practice. In the 1950s and 1960s, US arms control experts established the paradigm where rather than limiting the number or arms the goal was to manage nuclear deterrence relations (Bull 1965). From the viewpoint of the US, the NPT was a way to inhibit the spread of nuclear weapons (Gavin 2015), and to maintain its dominant international position (Gibbons 2022). This relied on the diplomatic and strategic practices of the newly formed nuclear weapon field that matured into the nuclear order.

Some NWS pointed to the difficulties involved in promoting nuclear deterrence while agreeing to disarm right at the start of the NPT’s establishment: NWS “are not wholly committed or sincere in their efforts to achieve complete disarmament and therefore are offering this new concept of arms control and limitations on strategic weapons” (Tanzania 1970, 4). Diplomatic experience and its multiple techniques were required to dampen this perennial issue of contention within the order (Gibbons 2022; Egeland 2025). The order itself is based on diplomatic expertise and legal agreements that are cited in the review documents: “The States parties urge the international community to enhance cooperation in the field of nonproliferation issues and to seek solutions to all concerns or issues related to non-proliferation in accordance with the obligations, procedures, and mechanisms established by the relevant international legal instruments” (United Nations Digital Library 2000).

Despite the tensions between the NWS and NWS, the NPT was established to deal with the problem of the liminal boundary and uncontrollable force of nuclear war. Both the need to limit nuclear proliferation and to achieve disarmament were legitimated with the security of humanity in the treaty text: “Considering the devastation that would be visited upon all mankind by a nuclear war and the consequent need to make every effort to avert the danger of such a war and to take measures to safeguard the security of peoples” (United Nations Office of Disarmament Affairs 2015, 3). NPT review conferences that were established to review progress within the remit of the treaty have retained the ex-

istence of nuclear weapons as a threat to human civilization and the existence of fauna (see United Nations Digital Library 2005). Just as the NPT is part and parcel of the broader non-proliferation regime (Ruzicka 2018), the entirety of humanity has similarly been securitized within this regime, for example in NWFZ agreements (United Nations Office of Disarmament Affairs 2015).

In terms of the fourth element of reifying social processes and political structures, the NPT is premised on positions of inequality (Bull 1975): the treaty identifies five legitimate possessors of nuclear weapons in its article IX, and denies the possibility of this from others. This violates the principle of sovereign equality that is the starting point of international law. From a political realist viewpoint, international treaties like the NPT are a way for greater powers to impose their supremacy on weaker states (Ruzicka 2019, 390–391). Accordingly, the NPT has been bitterly criticized for its discriminating “have and have-nots” nature, especially by India, and the PRC before Deng Xiaoping took over and the PRC joined the NPT (Fan 2016, 200, 204–205, see also Biswas 2014). In other words, the treaty produces positions of determinate superiority over determinate inferiority. For a long time, the stratification also excluded non-governmental organizations from the NPT process.

NWS have pointed to the need to end the unequal stratified division of NWS and NNWS. The NWS’s commitment to disarmament was thought to maintain the equality of states (Egeland 2025, 17). The negotiations resulted in the NPT that mainly consists of its three pillars of non-proliferation, peaceful use of nuclear energy, and disarmament (United Nations Office of Disarmament Affairs 2015). They formed the “grand bargain” (United Nations Office of Disarmament Affairs 2015, 19) that allowed the order to be established despite its discriminatory elements that went against the principle of international equality. The rights given to NWS are often reiterated in the review documents: “The Conference reaffirms that nothing in the Treaty shall be interpreted as affecting the inalienable right of all the parties to the Treaty to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination and in conformity with articles I, II and III of the Treaty. The Conference recognizes that this right constitutes one of the fundamental objectives of the Treaty” (United Nations Digital Library 2000).

Such reiteration of rights and obligations show how the treaty solidified the *de facto* status differences between states with nuclear weapons and those without them into the *de jure* form of international treaty. In terms of ritual, this transformed the position of states within the formal anarchical equality into positions of those who provide strategic stability and those who are not allowed to jeopardize it. With time, this reified the stratified interstate political structure in favor of the nuclear powers. The reviews also explicitly state the desire of making this order universal: “The Conference remains convinced that universal adherence to the Treaty can achieve [the] goal [of non-proliferation], and it urges all four States not parties to the Treaty, Cuba, India, Israel, and Pakistan, to accede to it without delay and without conditions” (United Nations Digital Library 2000).

NWS have many ways with which they have preserved both the power and identity nuclear weapons afford them; these aim to achieve strategic advantage and balance while denying nuclear deterrence from wannabe proliferators (Walker 2020, 22). The NPT can be included among such tools. Accordingly, the NPT together with its institutions have been conceptualized as nuclear abstinence, deterrence, and disarmament in terms of the normative effects that this ideo-

logical formation produced (Walker 2000). In effect, the NPT made nuclear weapon possession possible by defining their appropriate and normal possession (Panico 2022), shielded NWS from normative pressures (Egeland 2022), produced nuclear weapons as ultimate symbols of power and prestige (Egeland 2021a), and allowed the indefinite perpetuation of the discriminatory nuclear order (Biswas 2014). All these have been achieved behind a “veil of good intentions” (Ruzicka 2018, 371) that covered the paradoxical “collusion” of the superpowers against the NWS (*ibid.*, 373). My argument here is that the veil was enabled and has been maintained through the ritualization of the NPT in the form of its review conferences.

Rituals are episodic and repeated (Alexander 2004, 527), like the review that happens every 5 years with preparatory meetings in the meantime that prepare the grand ritual of the actual NPT conference. Joint ritual action includes dominant and subordinate actors; it embodies both the dominant’s position and the subordinate’s stake in it (Kustermans 2022, 8). Through its repetition, the review conference system of the NPT that oversaw progress within the pillars of the treaty defined the NWS a place and identity. The NPT review set the role from which NWS could present their complaints and annoyance in order to maintain the status quo, and placed the nuclear powers in a dominant position. Indeed, most regimes provide for venues in where their goals can be contested (Ruzicka 2018, 377) without jeopardizing the order that they concern; regimes that maintain power-disparities need pressure valves for managing the ebb and flow of institutional politicking. The NPT as part of the nuclear order can be included here, as it also provided for institutions that served as the settings for conducting the rituals of its review.

This concurs with how the failure of rituals to produce their stated goal can paradoxically strengthen the expert positions of those conducting the ritual as well as the institutions that enable them: rather than showing the ritual is ineffective, the failure can be framed in terms of insufficient adherence to or wrongly maneuvered techniques. The remedy for such failures is to strengthen the institutional structures that support the ritual. (Benford and Kurtz 1987, 473.) This general dynamic illuminates how the failure to produce nuclear disarmament has not resulted in abandonment of the NPT and its ways of doing things, but merely produced new institutional structures that end up maintaining the ritual sans achieving further disarmament.

Finally, in terms of the third framework element of identifying evil and establishing borders to it, the NPT has been used as a tool in deeming actions of some states as being outside the bounds of appropriate behavior: “The Conference expresses its concern with cases of non-compliance of the Treaty by States parties, and calls on those States non-compliant to move promptly to full compliance with their obligations. . . . The Conference deplores the nuclear test explosions carried out by India and then by Pakistan in 1998.” (United Nations Digital Library 2000).

States that have been framed as potential nuclear proliferations have been the target of sanctions and even military action that has been legitimated with the NPT. The ritualized shared statements of the NWS perform a collective self that sets NWS apart from those required to abide by non-proliferation. The treaty text and its ritualization through review interpellate identities for those contained within it and those outside of it: the NPT consists both of bureaucratic institutions and social structures of social domination that “encode” and “enact” the norms of non-proliferation, strategic stability, and deterrence (*cf.*, Kulkarni 2020, 160). The review

process sets particular identities: the commitment to strategic balance produces shared deterrer-identities for the NWS while the treaty itself works to deter potential proliferator states. Indeed, rituals are powerful ideological arenas where symbolic gestures and images affect “participants” sense of identity and social reality’ (Bell 1990, 299).

At the same time, the ritualized review process works to internalize the political paradigms of non-proliferation and disarmament (Lukes 1975, 302), thus creating the common sense of realistic disarmament. The common sense is that the deterrent capabilities of NWS need to be maintained despite their commitments to disarmament that would return sovereign equality. This is the cost of legitimating nuclear possession: commitments to disarmament cannot undermine or impede deterrence. Participation in the ritual provides both NWS with ways to maintain their disarmament identity, and all member states with a non-proliferator identity. When such identities rely on ritual, they can also be disrupted, as happened with the Humanitarian Initiative.

Disrupting the Review Ritual with the Humanitarian Initiative

The role of ritual in the NPT review is not to symbolize non-proliferation, but to actualize it. The review actualizes the order of the NPT and the nuclear powers’ commitment to maintaining deterrence and strategic stability. In its extreme, the “realistic” approach to deterrence and disarmament can take the form of “autocommunication,” where instead of the provision of new information, the purpose of communication is to maintain the nuclear order by repetition of political “mantras” or “codes” (Lotman 1990).

This is how and why symbols and their disruption are among the weapons of the weak: conformity is necessary for systems that rely on symbols for their legitimacy, because if too many subjects cease to comply, the symbolic order will crumble and lead to system change. This is because, “political rituals render relations of power transparent and rely on enactments of social domination. As a result, official political rituals have a double-edged character that reinforces relations of domination while simultaneously providing aggrieved actors with opportunities for dissension” (Pfaff and Yang 2001, 542). Indeed, “ritual practices can also afford resistance within acts of subordination” (Bell 1990, 311). Disrupting the work of actualizing symbols can therefore be a powerful tool. In effect, the ritual construction of social orders entails the threat of their fall and disintegration, as ritual interaction can provide for openings for glimpsing at possible change in the dramatic structures of social orders (Tavory and Haynes 2025, 55, 58).

Rituals form interaction orders that do not challenge the “face” of people and collective actors (Tavory and Haynes 2025, 56). Despite their lessened face in regard to the submissive position the treaty places them in, the NPT has functioned as a forum for NWS to vent their frustration at the inaction of weapon states in regard to disarmament (Ruzicka 2019, 393; Egeland 2021a). These criticisms even resulted in a thirteen “practical step” plan that mapped out how disarmament would be achieved (United Nations Digital Library 2000). Such pushes toward reminders of the commitment to disarmament were still made from set position within the NPT’s “realistic” path of incremental disarmament (see also United Nations Digital Library 1995). Even the formation of NWFZs did not constitute a rejection of the existing nuclear order (Hanson 2018, 477). With the Humanitarian Initiative however, non-nuclear-weapon states seemed to recognize that they had the same freedom to decide on the legitimacy

of nuclear weapons as those states that had nuclear weapons permitted by the treaty.

The NPT and its ritual were based on containing the grandest threat to humanity. Even though the NPT process had not changed this referent and mission, the post-Cold War period witnessed new forms of anti-nuclear security speech that departed from apocalyptic visions of an end of humanity. Here, nuclear weapons were no longer presented as threats to humanity, but as a lower-level humanitarian catastrophe represented even by a single use of a nuclear weapon in this new direction of anti-nuclear discourse within the NPT: the final document of the 2010 NPT review voiced “deep concern at the continued risk for humanity represented by the possibility that these weapons could be used and the catastrophic humanitarian consequences that would result from the use of nuclear weapons” (United Nations Digital Library 2010).

Indeed, the humanitarian initiative differed significantly from the long-standing line of anti-nuclear securitization: the referent object was no longer humanity but a general subject defined by humanitarian law. Humanitarianism was a new context for discussing nuclear weapons within large state conferences (Hanson 2018, 469), and “this was the first time explicit humanitarian language had been used in official NPT documents” (Gibbons 2018, 17); “68 years into the nuclear age, [conferences on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons] were the first ever inter-governmental meetings dedicated to the humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons” (Helfand et al. 2016). The humanitarian initiative thus produced a new kind of political subject in relation to the macrosecuritization of humankind (Vuori 2010). It also departed from the incremental approach to disarmament that was part of the NPT’s realism (Egeland et al. 2018), and eventually broke the consensus of the disarmament community (Egeland 2021b).

The seeds for making such disruption possible were sown in the 1978 UN special session on disarmament that allowed NGOs and research institutes an active role as participants, thus altering the stratification of international actors involved. This enabled civil society organizations to coordinate shared efforts within the broader disarmament regime (Egeland 2025, 52–53). NGOs were given the opportunity to address the floor in the NPT’s informal preparatory sessions in 1997 (ibid., 102). Eventually, the non-proliferation regime too had a number of forums where both NWS and NGOs could bring up their frustration with the lack of progress in nuclear disarmament, and to remind the NWS of the unequal structure of the order (Ruzicka 2018, 379). While there is a long history of such contestation within the NPT, the humanitarian initiative stands apart here, as it challenged the ritualistic maintenance of the rationale that is required for deterrence to remain a credible policy. As such, the initiative went beyond the regular griping of the NWS within the NPT review. As who was able to attend the ritual actively changed, so too did the prospects for who could disrupt it.

Consequently, non-governmental organizations, particularly the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons had a major role in the establishment of the TPNW (Gibbons 2018; Krasno and Szeli 2021). Their discourse shifted from visions of global destruction to the humanitarian disasters that even an individual nuclear explosion represents. The discussion of the humanitarian initiative within the ritual of the NPT review provided for an opening through which a dramatic change in the social positions that the ritual maintained could be glimpsed: there could be a world where nuclear weapon possession went against humanitarian law (cf., Tavery and Haynes 2025, 57, 60).

Indeed, disruption is not always necessarily “of” something, it can also be “for” something (Tavery and Haynes 2025, 58). In the case of disrupting the NPT, the humanitarian initiative was for delegitimizing nuclear weapon possession based on pre-existing humanitarian law concerning the waging of war. Such disruptive moments move one ordered situation into another (ibid.). This is also evident in the establishment of the TPNW as a venue for a new nuclear order and ritual that works against the practice of deterrence and the legitimacy of nuclear weapon possession that claims to provide deterrence. The failure of following through the thirteen step plan and the 2010 action plan had become too much for the NWS and they no-longer went through the motions of the review cycle (Egeland 2025, 139). The ritual had become illegitimate for them.

The preamble of the TPNW has the same main argument as the Humanitarian Initiative that sets the treaty apart from the NPT (United Nations Digital Library 2017): the treaty is mindful of how the risk of even accidental nuclear detonations “concern the security of all humanity and that all States share the responsibility to prevent any use of nuclear weapons,” and cognizant of their “grave implications for human survival” (ibid.). Rather than providing for NWS and NWS stratification through national security interests based on nuclear deterrence, the treaty frames nuclear disarmament and a “nuclear-weapon-free world” as “a global public good”, as “serving both national and collective security interests” (ibid.). Still, the treaty does allow for withdrawing from it if its subject matter has “jeopardized the supreme interests of its country” (ibid.).

The NPT order consisted of systems of abstinence, deterrence, and disarmament (Walker 2000). By pointing to the humanitarian consequences that go beyond the limits set for humanitarian conduct in pre-existing treaties, the initiative worked to undermine the narrative and rationale behind nuclear deterrence (Ruzicka 2019, 394). The Humanitarian Initiative disrupted the established consensus of the NPT. Rather than the guarantors of strategic stability, and thereby the preventers of nuclear holocaust, a singular deliberate use or even an accident would produce too much humanitarian suffering that would go beyond the humanitarian limits. This broke the promise of the ritual and provided a glimpse into another possible social order. While this has been previously considered in terms of moral and legal claims (e.g., Ruzicka 2019), such a disruption also concerns social orders, “face,” and emotion management. Undermining deterrence in this way is similar to pointing to the ridiculousness of 1950s civil defense plans in the face of thermonuclear war. Indeed, the impropriety of the disruption is visible in the counter-resistance to the TPNW (United Nations Digital Library 2017) shown by NWS and even proponents of “realistic” nuclear disarmament (Hanson 2018, 480; Gibbons 2018, 23, 27; Egeland et al. 2018, 74–75; Egeland 2021a, 229). NWS and those covered by their deterrent umbrella have remained outside of the treaty *per se* even though some of them had an active role in the Humanitarian Initiative.

Conclusions

Gorbachev and Reagan’s statement that “nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought” (Joint Soviet-United States Statement 1985) became a sacred moment for Cold War nuclear disarmament and it has subsequently been ritualized by the NWS. This sacred vocabulary is used in the face of failed disarmament, rearmament, and war in Ukraine to contain the terror of renewed nuclear antagonism and to turn it into manageable fear. Shared statements of the need to maintain

strategic balance and the NPT review ritual represent forms of word-magic to contain the destructive power of nuclear explosions while at the same time legitimate the possession of nuclear weapons and the consequential inequality among sovereign states.

In terms of ritualization as institutional maintenance, the NPT review adheres to key features of ritualized action: (1) it was set up to provide solutions to the problem of war and “the security of peoples” that represents the most extreme of situations and an uncontrollable force, (2) it is rooted in expert diplomatic experience as it is based on international treaty that formed into a wider non-proliferation regime and is repeatedly discussed by diplomats in its preparatory and review conferences, (3) it identifies evil and marks boundaries by legitimating sanctions against states that do not abide by the treaty’s non-proliferation commitments that have included military action, and (4) it reifies social processes and reinforces international political structures by placing NWS into a dominant position in regard to NWS and for a long time excluding NGOs.

The NPT review ritual affords NWS a justification for their weapon possession with fewer reputational costs; nuclear weapon possession and their deployment in turn is believed to beget deterrence and strategic stability. At the same time, the ritual maintains the NWS’ privileged symbolic position of supremacy over other sovereigns that are denied the right of nuclear weapon possession. “Ritualization replicates much of what it seeks to transform” (Bell 1990, 308); accordingly, the NPT maintains the ill of nuclear weapons all the while claiming to be the only realistic cure for them. Rituals do not name the contradiction they entail, but provide the symbolic means for embodying and dominating the contradiction (Bell 1990, 309). In the review ritual, this contradiction is the one between disarmament and non-proliferation: disarmament does not disallow nuclear possession as such from those disarming while doing so for those without possession.

Rituals define what is to be thought, said, and done which provides assurances for the participants of rituals that their worldview that the ritual supports and connects to provides answers to the crisis or liminal boundary they are dealing with (Benford and Kurtz 1987, 466). NWS representatives can be assured that the NPT counters nuclear threats from potential nuclear states and maintains deterrence as the preventer of nuclear war, whereas NWS representatives can be assured that they are part of the only “realistic” path to nuclear disarmament. All know what to do and say in their set positions within the review process ritual. The NPT and its review ritual interpellate deterrers as maintainers of strategic stability, who contain the terror of the unimaginable destruction that nuclear war would produce, and non-proliferators who curtail their own right to become such guarantors of strategic balance while keeping nuclear chaos at bay through this restraint. These are the shared values that are internalized through the ritualization and professionalization of non-proliferation. The ritual backs up the practice of nuclear deterrence by enabling the permanence of nuclear weapons and reproduces the social order of nuclear hierarchy into the formal anarchy of equal sovereigns. The ritual compels the liminal moment of nuclear war to the beyond, thus ensuring the continuation of the everyday without the need of constant existential terror that nuclear annihilation would entail. At the same time, the ritual provides for a glimpse of the possible through article VI of the NPT, that perennially remains a goal that “will not be reached quickly—perhaps not in my lifetime” (Obama 2009). This is the unattainable that saves the face of those in a subjugated position in the hierarchy established by the treaty.

The TPNW differs from the NPT in two key features in light of the elements of ritual action I discussed here. Like the NPT, the TPNW (1) purports to be a solution to the problem of nuclear war, and is also (2) rooted in diplomatic practice and experience, as it explicitly draws on humanitarian law as its basis. The qualitative differences with the NPT are in how the TPNW (3) identifies evil and its borders: any nuclear explosion, irrespective of whether it is in anger is considered enough of an evil to go counter to humanitarian law against suffering. Secondly, the TPNW (4) reifies international political structures differently: NWS would not be able to keep their particular position indefinitely, which would end the formal stratification of states within the confines of the treaty.

Indeed, while the NPT’s ritual order has been retained despite contestation within it, it is vulnerable to disruption as is any ritual that deals with the possible in addition to what already is. Accordingly, the NPT review ritual was disrupted by the Humanitarian Initiative. This disruption resulted in the formation of a new ritual order of the TPNW that does not work to maintain nuclear deterrence but instead works to permanently exile the liminal possibility of nuclear holocaust by abolishing the means of bringing it about. This heretical ritual does not maintain the face of both the NWS and NWS, but stigmatizes nuclear possession and questions its legitimacy claimed in the name of deterrence. The TPNW interpellates a different social order that returns states to an equal position in regard to no-one having the unilateral possibility to end the world as it has been known. This shows how the high politics world of nuclear diplomacy is not immune or devoid of things like emotion management or the maintenance of identities and social orders. Accordingly, nuclear deterrence and the NPT are not founded on rationality, but in beliefs maintained by ritualization.

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