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Minilateralism and effective multilateralism in the global nuclear order

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ABSTRACT

Following the 2023 report of the United Nations High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism, this paper addresses the relationship between minilateralism and multilateralism in the global nuclear order. The paper theorizes minilateralism as a relational concept and fluid praxis, introducing a typology of *inside* and *outside* minilateralism. It then traces and analyzes these types of minilateralism within global nuclear weapons governance from 1970 to 2020. The paper finds that how states pursue minilateralism is conditional on how they perceive the effectiveness and legitimacy of wider membership multilateral institutions in nuclear governance. How complementary minilateralism is to effective multilateralism comes down to how minilateral groupings are positioned relative to multilateral institutions, how willing and able they are to integrate their activities in those institutions, and whether they, in turn, are considered legitimate. The paper concludes with recommendations for how minilateralism can complement effective multilateralism in global nuclear weapons governance and beyond.

KEYWORDS Minilateralism; effective multilateralism; global nuclear order; nuclear weapons governance; NPT

In 2022, the United Nations (UN) Secretary General launched the High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism (hereinafter HLAB). In its report, published in 2023, the HLAB draws attention to nuclear weapons as constituting "the most immediate existential risk to life on this planet" (HLAB, 2023, p. 51). The report went on to stipulate that global nuclear weapons governance is increasingly associated with "deadlock in multilateral processes" and "stagnation" in the pursuit of denuclearization (HLAB, 2023, pp. 19–20). In the HLAB's *Framing Paper*, reference is further made to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

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(NPT) as an example of how the anarchic condition of the international system, coupled with sovereignty and national interests, noticeably challenge global governance efforts (HLAB, 2022). According to the HLAB, a "central objective of effective multilateralism" then is to strengthen "governance arrangements that can deliver global public goods" (HLAB, n.d.).

In an era of "loose multilateralism" (Parlar Dal & Dipama, 2022) a governance arrangement that has gained increasing traction is that of *minilateralism*, or the "bringing together of the smallest possible number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem" (Naím, 2009, p. 135). Minilateralism occurs when "clubs of the willing and relevant" (Haass, 2010) pursue shared interests to advance collective action in the face of transnational governance problems (Eckersley, 2012; Kahler, 1992; Patrick, 2015). According to the extant scholarship, minilateral groupings—smaller in number than the more "universal" multilateralism that has come to be associated with today's multilateral institutions—are seen as a "stepping stone" for broader multilateral progress (Eckersley, 2012, p. 25), a flexible and pragmatic "solution" (Haass, 2010) to "reinvigorate multilateralism" (Patrick, 2015, p. 127), a "viable way forward" in overcoming the "inadequacy of the current multilateral system" (Mladenov, 2023), and an efficient governance mechanism to minimize divisions and contracting costs, enhance collective gains, and reduce the likelihood of "spoilers" hindering multilateral progress (Matchett, 2021, p. 824).

Minilateralism is moreover signposted towards—if not directly referenced—in the HLAB's 2023 report. Specifically, the report states that effective multilateralism should be *flexible*, allowing "*sub-groupings of states* to explore, innovate, and implement new approaches to global problems for broader deliberation and adoption" (HLAB, 2023, p. 14 *emphasis added*). An assumption thus follows that minilateralism can complement effective multilateralism, providing efficient, flexible and oftentimes innovative approaches decided among a smaller group of the most willing and relevant states, which can later be deliberated and adopted by multilateral institutions. Such an assumption nevertheless remains empirically and conceptually ambiguous with some studies suggesting an "efficiency-legitimacy tradeoff" and subsequent multilateral "backlash" to minilateral solutions (Matchett, 2021; also Eckersley, 2012). The HLAB report does also highlight that effective multilateralism must be *representative*, *transparent*, *equitable* and *accountable*—all principles that minilateralism typically downplays in the interests of more efficient decision-making (Eckersley, 2012; Matchett, 2021). Pressing questions then start to emerge when we consider the relationship between minilateralism and multilateralism, particularly where it concerns their perceived effectiveness and legitimacy.

This article addresses the relationship between minilateralism and multilateralism within the specific context of the global nuclear order and the NPT

as its cornerstone multilateral institution. It asks: *how and under what conditions do states pursue minilateralism in the global nuclear order?* In addressing this question, the paper not only seeks to examine the mini- vs. multilateral dynamics of the global nuclear order. It also seeks to reflect on the complementarity of minilateralism to the NPT and other wider membership multilateral institutions in this field of governance. Adopting a pragmatist approach,[1] I observe the global governance of nuclear weapons and its associated global nuclear order as a pertinent field of inquiry for examining the characteristics and mechanisms of minilateralism relative to multilateralism. The persistent public challenge regarding the perceived *in*effectiveness of established multilateral institutions in global nuclear weapons governance (HLAB, 2023; 2022; Meyer, 2019; Müller, 2010; Müller, 2017; Potter, 2005), increased contestation in sustaining a global nuclear order with "competing impulses towards deterrence and disarmament" (Knopf, 2022, p. 19; Baldus et al., 2021; Budjeryn, 2022; Jasper, 2021), and the fact that minilateral group dynamics are a common and growing phenomenon in this field (Dee, 2017; Kmentt, 2015; Knopf, 2022; Matchett, 2021; Meyer, 2019; Sauer, 2019), makes this a crucial case representing an outcome of interest (Gerring, 2007) in understanding the relationship between minilateralism and more effective multilateralism.

The article argues that *how* states pursue minilateralism in nuclear weapons governance, and the distinct forms that minilateralism can take, is conditional on how they perceive the effectiveness and legitimacy of the NPT and other established multilateral institutions within the global nuclear order. To develop and advance this argument, the contribution is outlined in five main sections. Section one reviews the extant scholarship surrounding the effective mini- vs. multilateral dilemma (Bouchard & Peterson, 2011). Section two details the main challenges facing multilateralism in the global nuclear order. Section three contributes to theorizing minilateralism as a relational concept and fluid praxis, introducing the typology of *inside* and *outside* minilateralism to distinguish minilateral groupings and their positioning and scope of activities relative to established wider membership multilateral institutions. Section four then traces and analyzes some of the main minilateral group dynamics in global nuclear weapons governance over the period 1970–2020. Section five offers conclusions and highlights recommendations for how minilateral groupings might complement effective multilateralism in the global nuclear order, with practical takeways for global governance more broadly.

The effective mini- vs. multilateral dilemma

Multilateralism is defined as "three or more actors engaging in voluntary and (essentially) institutionalised international cooperation governed by norms and principles, with rules that apply (by and large) equally to all states" (Bouchard & Peterson, 2011, p. 10; Bouchard et al., 2014). Multilateralism

may be pursued "through ad hoc arrangements or by means of institutions" (Keohane, 1990, p. 733). Multilateral coordination practices can, as such, take varying forms. As an analytical concept, however, multilateralism has certain distinguishing features. First, multilateralism places particular importance on rules and general principles in governing the actions, and interactions, of global actors where that involves more than one (unilateralism) or two (bilateralism) states (Bouchard & Peterson, 2011, p. 10). Ruggie (1992), for example, argued the significance of multilateralism in socializing states to general principles of "appropriate conduct" (p. 571), such as indivisibility, and diffuse reciprocity in spreading the costs and benefits of collective action (Bouchard & Peterson, 2011, p. 7; Ruggie, 1992, pp. 567–571). Second, multilateralism is inclusive. After the second World War, particularly in the context of decolonization, multilateralism came to embody the principles of non-discrimination and the sovereign equality of states (Kahler, 1992). Over time, multilateralism came to express "an impulse to universality", being associated with "international governance of the 'many'" (Kahler, 1992, p. 681) and thus the participation of large numbers of sovereign states in deliberations over global public goods through multilateral institutions.

Multilateral institutions are understood as "multilateral arrangements with persistent sets of rules" (Keohane, 1990, p. 732) typically involving a permanent secretariat and constitutional or founding treaty (Caporaso, 1992). Multilateral institutions serve both as an "ideal type" of multilateralism (Bouchard & Peterson, 2011, p. 20) and important channels "through which socialization of actors to the principles of multilateralism can be achieved" (Parlar Dal & Dipama, 2022, p. 563). Yet multilateral institutions are also at the epicenter of "a rolling crisis of legitimacy" (HLAB, 2023, p. 4) in today's international system. Multilateral institutions derive legitimacy from their inclusivity, and the common rules and principles that their members determine and uphold. As Parlar Dal and Dipama (2022) highlight, multilateral institutions are conduits for a "multilateralism-legitimacy nexus" where "rules deriving from multilateral institutions must be acceptable to the audiences (elites and public opinion)" (p. 563). Where multilateral institutions then experience a legitimacy deficit, they "lose the authority conferred upon them by governments and citizens and face a lack of compliance with their stated rules and policies" (p. 563).

The legitimacy crisis and criticism now levelled at many of today's multilateral institutions stems from several sources. As numerous sovereign states come together through multilateral institutions to deliberate and coordinate collective action for the global public good, they are invariably faced with obstacles in effective decision-making. As Caporaso (1992) highlighted, the larger the group, "the more multilateral the cooperative arrangement, but the more difficult it is to pull off cooperation" (p. 607). Larger numbers generate greater organizational costs, lower individual gains and consequently

less motivation among individual agents (Sandler, 2004). While multilateral institutions were established to advance inclusivity, representation and sovereign equality in the post-Second World War period, decolonization and the collapse of the Soviet Union also saw the number of sovereign states noticeably rise by the end of the 20th century. That very scale does then hinder the capacity of multilateral institutions to easily decide collective action, deliver global public goods, and enforce compliance with common rules.

The legitimacy crisis further stems from the fact that the balance of power within today's international system has shifted dramatically since the post-Second World War era when most multilateral institutions were established. While great power cooperation was essential for the establishment of multilateral institutions, over time multilateral institutions also served as forums for great power competition and contestation resulting in multilateral stagnation and frustration (Prantl, 2006). China's rise and Russia's resurgence have moreover signaled an emergent multipolarity that presents new challenges for those multilateral institutions initiated and advanced predominantly under US leadership (Davis Gibbons & Herzog, 2021). From a realist perspective, multilateralism is also anticipated to be weak because the great powers will protect themselves against any collective venture in which a majority of states can dominate them and lock them into costly action. An argument then follows that states—and particularly great powers—in pursuit of their own advantage, will advance coordination activities where they can best control outcomes while avoiding freeriding by weaker states (Kahler, 1992).

According to the European Union (EU)—a staunch champion of the principle of effective multilateralism—"multilateralism must be effective, fair and deliver results" (European Commission, 2021). In an effort to overcome the myriad challenges facing multilateralism in the 21st century, the UN sponsored a High-Level Board on Effective Multilateralism (HLAB) in 2022. The HLAB's 2023 report detailed ten criteria necessary for multilateralism to be effective. Specifically, the report stressed that multilateralism needed to be more people-centered, representative, transparent, equitable, networked, resourced, mission-focused, flexible, accountable, and future-oriented (detailed in Table 1).

Important to highlight is that while the HLAB criteria identify the need for effective multilateralism to deliver "tangible results" (Table 1, criterium 1), they predominantly prioritize the need for effective *processes* of multilateralism. Akin to the EU's approach, effective multilateralism then is associated with strengthening international organizations and reforming multilateral processes to ensure they are "fit for purpose" (European Commission, 2021, p. 7). For this reason, references to "effective multilateralism" in this article concern primarily effective processes of multilateral

Table 1. The HLAB criteria for effective multilateralism.

1. **People-centered** (delivering tangible results for people)	2. **Representative** (deriving legitimacy from meaningful representation and a clear role in decision-making)	3. **Transparent** (building, open, common assessments of global risks, and ensuring universal access to public data and knowledge)
4. **Equitable** (recognizing common but differentiated responsibilities; prioritizing delivery for vulnerable and historically excluded communities; upholding principles of gender equality)	5. **Networked** (bringing constellations of States and non-State actors together to achieve goals)	6. **Resourced** (generating sufficient public and private financial flows to maintain, protect, and deliver global public goods)
7. **Mission-focused** (building a common understanding of the tasks needed to achieve success; setting clear measurable targets)	8. **Flexible** (allowing sub-groupings of states to explore, innovate, and implement new approaches to global problems for broader deliberation and adoption)	9. **Accountable** (adopting common, enforceable rules that cannot be broken with impunity by any actor)
10. **Future-oriented** (responding to emerging risks and new global shocks quickly … and putting in place structures and processes that can evolve over time to meet the needs of future generations)		

Source: Compiled from the High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism report (2023).

coordination and deliberation.[2] Of particular interest to this study, the HLAB report stipulated that for multilateralism to be effective it must be *flexible*, involving "sub-groupings of states" and *representative*, "deriving legitimacy from meaningful representation and a clear role in decision-making" (Table 1, criteria 2 and 8). Crucially, the flexibility of "sub-groups" with "meaningful representation" is a particular characteristic of minilateralism.

Minilateralism involves coalitions of the willing or "sub-sets of countries to agree to commitments in specific policy areas" (Hoekman, 2015, p. 1010) without being blocked by other states who are unwilling or unable to participate. As a typically informal governance arrangement, minilateralism is found to have the advantages of speed, flexibility of processes and decision-making, minimal bureaucracy and low costs relative to more formalized multilateral institutions (Sauer, 2019, p. 941). According to Moret (2016), minilateralism is a "diplomatic process of a small group of interested parties working together to supplement or complement the activities of international organizations in tackling subjects deemed too complicated to be addressed appropriately at the multilateral level" (p. 2). Minilateralism, then, is viewed as something that can help multilateral institutions by providing more efficient solutions to complex problems. Such a viewpoint does nevertheless come with an assumption that minilateral innovations will become *multilateralized*, that is, they are advanced "for broader deliberation and adoption" by existing multilateral institutions (HLAB, 2023, p. 14; Prantl, 2006).

Yet the complementarity of minilateralism to existing multilateral institutions remains under-studied and uncertain. Some suggest an "efficiency-

legitimacy trade-off" when states utilize minilateralism as a governance arrangement (Matchett, 2021). The smaller number of actors and ad hoc nature of minilateral initiatives also draws criticism for their lack of equity, transparency and accountability (Eckersley, 2012; Matchett, 2021)—all criteria judged necessary for multilateralism to be effective according to the HLAB (Table 1). Oelgemöller (2011) further identifies the lack of transparency in minilateral formats,[3] being characterized by their informality, opaqueness, restricted format, and membership as "coteries of the like-minded" (pp. 114–115). The more exclusive nature of minilateralism compared to the inclusivity and near universality of multilateral institutions, and what then constitutes "meaningful representation" (HLAB, 2023) raises further criticism that any deal struck by minilateral groups is "likely to lack legitimacy in the eyes of excluded states" (Eckersley, 2012, p. 33). As Patrick (2015) suggests, "minilateralism is wonderful if your country is in the […] room, but less so when it is on the outside peering in" (p. 129).

Smaller groups or clubs are seen as particularly problematic for smaller and poorer nations who are frequently excluded from membership, essentially undermining the advantages that many states gained through their participation in multilateral institutions after decolonization (Basedow, 2018, p. 418; Eckersley, 2012; Patrick, 2015). This is a challenge not helped by the fact that minilateralism is often a means by which more powerful states seek "to bypass the slow, and lowest common denominator approach of broader membership multilateral forums" (Gill, 2020, p. 5). The proliferation of ad hoc minilateral groupings is further highlighted for its risks in creating a "fragmented system of redundant institutions that are stumbling blocks (rather than building blocks) to global cooperation" and which "undercut the capabilities, credibility, and legitimacy of standing, universal membership international organizations" (Patrick, 2015, p. 127). Such fragmentation may further be attributed to the limited institutionalization of ad hoc collective solutions derived among smaller groups of states to multilateral institutions (Matchett, 2021; Morse & Keohane, 2014; Sauer, 2019). In this view, minilateralism can be observed more as a hindrance to effective multilateralism, creating not only a patchwork of fragmented—and potentially competing—institutions, norms and practices that hinder wider multilateral efforts, but which also brings the legitimacy and credibility of established multilateral institutions into question.

Challenges for multilateralism in the global nuclear order

The 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) alongside other multilateral institutions addressing the global governance of nuclear weapons, such as the Conference on Disarmament, the UN First Committee, the UN Disarmament Commission, the IAEA General

Conference, and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), makes up the main multilateral architecture of what is often referred to as the global nuclear order. The global nuclear order is broadly defined as "an evolving and complex set of institutions, norms, and practices governing the development, deployment and use of nuclear technology worldwide" (Vicente et al., 2023, p. 8). That order intends to "preserve nuclear stability, maintain international peace and security … and prevent the spread of nuclear weapons to additional states or non-state actors while pursuing gradual disarmament" (Vicente et al., 2023, p. 8). The global nuclear order, and the multilateral architecture underpinning it, uphold three core functions (known in the NPT context as pillars), including preventing the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons technology, promoting cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, and pursuing negotiations in good faith on nuclear disarmament measures.

The NPT is widely acknowledged as a "central element" (Baldus et al., 2021; Davis Gibbons & Herzog, 2021, p. 50) of a nuclear order that is essential in upholding the principles of nuclear restraint, nuclear stability and the prevention of nuclear annihilation (Budjeryn, 2022). The NPT is, moreover, recognized for its effectiveness in preventing the horizontal proliferation of nuclear weapons, and in facilitating inter-state cooperation and compliance in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy (Baldus et al., 2021; Davis Gibbons & Herzog, 2021; Gerzoy, 2015; Koch, 2019). However, the legitimacy and effectiveness of the NPT as a cornerstone multilateral institution within the global nuclear order, alongside other multilateral institutions, most notably, the Conference on Disarmament, are also heavily contested and lamented for their dysfunction, contradiction and distress (Budjeryn, 2022; Jasper, 2021; Meyer, 2021).

On a prosaic level, that dysfunction is associated with the number of times NPT States Parties have failed to deliver consensus-based outcome documents at NPT Review Conferences (RevCon). As a multilateral institution, the NPT makes decisions by consensus, which makes it easier for individual States Parties to block multilateral progress.[4] Since the NPT's indefinite extension in 1995, only two RevCons have delivered outcome documents, namely the *13 Practical Steps* intended to deliver progress towards nuclear disarmament in 2000, and the 64-point *Action Plan* intended to implement concrete measures for progress across all three pillars of the NPT in 2010. The 2000 *13 Practical Steps* and 2010 *Action Plan* remain largely unimplemented by the nuclear weapon states (NWS) with regards to nuclear disarmament.

On a much deeper level, however, the perceived effectiveness and legitimacy of the NPT, along with other multilateral institutions, is shaped by the stark—and widening—political cleavages that exist not only between the nuclear "haves", but between the nuclear "haves" and "have nots". The

global nuclear order is grounded in a grand bargain which, under the terms of the NPT, sees a majority 185 non-nuclear weapon state (NNWS) NPT States Parties agree not to pursue nuclear weapons and adhere to IAEA safeguards, on the premise that the five NWS NPT States Parties (also referred to as the P5 or N5) take steps in good faith towards nuclear disarmament. Despite the fact that the majority of NNWS uphold their end of the grand bargain,[5] it has become an increasingly frustrated and bitter criticism that the P5 have not reciprocated. Although the US and Russia made substantive progress to reduce their nuclear arsenals after the height of the Cold War, the P5 today are investing in modernizing, and even increasing, their nuclear arsenals. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has also widened this schism, serving to highlight that a NNWS can still be invaded by a NWS, despite their respective obligations under the NPT, and the very principles of restraint that the global nuclear order is built upon. Adding fuel to the flames, in August 2022 it was Russia (a NWS) who blocked an outcome document deliberated by States Parties at the 10th NPT Review Conference.[6] Rising geopolitical tensions and divisions between the P5 also amplify concerns about the NPT's durability, with Russia and China (the P2) increasingly unwilling to cooperate with the US, alongside the UK and France (P3), in efforts to strengthen or bolster the NPT regime (Davis Gibbons & Herzog, 2021, p. 64).

A consequence of these deepening divisions has not only been multilateral stagnation mired in frustration, but a growing legitimacy deficit for the NPT (Considine, 2019; Doyle, 2017). Discontent and contestation surround the NPT as the cornerstone of a global nuclear order perceived to be "highly unequal and arguably unjust" (Jasper, 2021, p. 42; Müller, 2017, p. 14), being grounded in nuclear hegemony and nuclearism (Ritchie, 2022). In this view, the NPT is perceived as a legitimate and effective multilateral institution only insofar as it sustains a rules-based global nuclear order that upholds the power, status and position of an exclusive group of nuclear "haves", while the nuclear "have nots" await any progress on disarmament with ever growing resentment and resistance (Müller, 2017, p. 14; Ritchie, 2022).

According to Morse and Keohane (2014), where states become dissatisfied with established multilateral institutions, contested multilateralism, "characterized by competing coalitions and shifting institutional arrangements" (p. 386) will emerge. Global nuclear weapons governance is no exception. In 2017, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) was negotiated in the UN General Assembly—crucially a multilateral institution where majoritarian decision-making ensured that the NWS and their allies could not block. The TPNW is the first legally binding international agreement that comprehensively prohibits participation in any nuclear weapon activities. In contrast to the NPT, the TPNW is grounded in humanitarian

rather than traditional security logics. The preamble to the TPNW stipulates not only deep concern "about the catastrophic humanitarian consequences that would result from any use of nuclear weapons" but acknowledges "the ethical imperatives for nuclear disarmament" and the urgent need to deliver a nuclear-weapon-free world as "a global public good of the highest order" (UN, 2017). In January 2021, the TPNW entered into force and, at time of writing, has 70 States Parties—all of whom are NNWS. Thus far, no NWS, or their allies, have supported the TPNW. In fact, shortly before the TPNW entered into force, NATO allies opposed the Treaty, stating that, "it does not reflect the increasingly challenging international security environment" and "risks undermining the global non-proliferation and disarmament architecture with the NPT at its heart for more than 50 years" (NATO, 2020).

As this section has highlighted, global nuclear weapons governance is increasingly characterized by the challenges and conditions of multilateral stagnation and frustration leading to competitive and even contested multilateralism. As I shall address in the next sections, such conditions are not only pivotal in understanding the increase of minilateralism within the global nuclear order since the NPT's entry into force, but also the distinct *types* of minilateralism that states have pursued.

Conceptualizing minilateralism: A typology

Despite being referenced in the academic scholarship since the early 1990s (Kahler, 1992), minilateralism has in fact received relatively limited conceptual or typological unpacking, often being treated as something of an umbrella term, but with little delineation as to the distinct forms that minilateralism can take. Minilateralism can also be found wearing different conceptual guises within the scholarship. From that scholarship, however, several characteristics of minilateralism can be identified. *First*, minilateralism is a form of informal governance (Kahler, 1992; Sauer, 2019) aimed at overcoming specific transnational governance problems (Matchett, 2021; Naím, 2009; Prantl, 2006). *Second*, minilateralism entails smaller sub-group decision-making involving the most willing and relevant actors, distinctive from wider membership multilateral institutions (Haass, 2010; Kahler, 1992; Moret, 2016; Sauer, 2019). *Third*, minilateralism may involve ad hoc arrangements (Sauer, 2019) or the establishment of more formalized institutions (Matchett, 2021; Moret, 2016). And *fourth*, minilateralism may be complementary (a part of) or supplementary (apart from) existing multilateral institutions (Harnisch, 2007; Morse & Keohane, 2014; Moret, 2016; Naím, 2009; Sauer, 2019).

Building on these characteristics, I argue that minilateralism is, above all, a relational concept, understood only insofar as it relates to existing multilateral institutions and the transnational problems they are intended to tackle

(also Harnisch, 2007; Sauer, 2019). Minilateral groupings serve as "agents of incremental change" (Prantl, 2006, p. 70), intended to advance collective action by either contributing to or bypassing the activities of established multilateral institutions. *How* states pursue minilateralism is then conditional on their attitudes towards established multilateral institutions, and their perceived effectiveness and legitimacy in performing the functions of facilitating intra-state coordination, decision-making, oversight and the delivery of global public goods in addressing transnational problems.

Here I introduce a typology that distinguishes minilateral groupings by their positionality towards, and activities within, established multilateral institutions. *Inside* minilateralism distinguishes minilateral groupings that form and operate specifically *within* established multilateral institutions. Inside minilateral groupings explicitly, and exclusively, integrate their activities within a multilateral institution's own processes of negotiation and deliberation, directly participating in those proceedings as a primary forum for advancing collective action and overcoming transnational problems. As Sauer (2019) identifies, inside minilateral groupings may constitute coalitions that help to "overcome decision-making deadlocks in formal international organizations" (p. 943). The international negotiation scholarship further defines coalitions as, "any group of decision-makers participating in … a negotiation and who agree to act in concert to achieve a common end" (Hamilton & Whalley, 1988, p. 8). Within multilateral negotiations coalitions are an essential method by which states manage complexity, enhance their bargaining position, share information, and innovate and seek solutions to advance multilateral progress (Dee, 2017). Where coalitions form with the purpose of advancing multilateral negotiations, particularly to innovate, problem-solve or deliberate for the purpose of overcoming wider multilateral governance problems and stagnation, they serve as a form of inside minilateralism.

Outside minilateralism, by contrast, is distinguished by those minilateral groupings that form and operate primarily *apart* from existing multilateral institutions. Outside minilateral groupings are "bolt-ons" (Simpson, 2011; Williams, 2020) established as alternative deliberative or technical forums separate from the deliberation and negotiation processes within established multilateral institutions. Sauer (2019) too associates such outside groupings as "alternatives … of formal international organizations" (p. 943). Within the global trade governance literature, the term "plurilateralism" is also used to describe the same process of minilateralism *apart* from established multilateral institutions, and which allow "sub-sets of countries" (Hoekman, 2015, p. 1010) to agree to their own commitments, among their own selected participants. In so doing outside minilateral groupings deliberate and decide in forums which expressly bypass the slower processes of wider membership multilateral institutions, and which can then avoid the risk of decisions being blocked by other states.

Advancing the typology further, as minilateralism involves informal, oftentimes ad hoc governance arrangements pursued by states to overcome transnational problems relational to multilateral institutions, we must also assume that minilateralism is a fluid praxis were state activities can shift both inside and outside of established multilateral institutions. Consider, for example, that in the context of contested multilateralism (Morse & Keohane, 2014), "dissatisfied coalitions" constitute minilateralism. Dissatisfied with the status quo of an existing multilateral institution, these coalitions shift the focus of their activity to an alternative or new institution (Morse & Keohane, 2014, p. 388). Minilateral groups may then form and advance their activities *inside* a multilateral institution but shift their activities *outside* of that institution where its members seek an alternative multilateral forum to pursue global public goods (*inside-outside*). As the extant scholarship surrounding the effective mini- vs. multilateral dilemma also intimates, states may pursue minilateralism *outside* of established multilateral institutions but with the assumption that they will redirect their activities *inside* that institution where their solutions can receive "broader deliberation and adoption" (HLAB, 2023) (*outside-inside*).

In the following section, these distinct types of minilateralism, specifically addressing inside and outside minilateralism, along with shifting practices of minilateralism (*outside-inside* and *inside-outside*)—will be traced and examined in the context of global nuclear weapons governance.

Minilateralism in global nuclear weapons governance (1970–2020)

Table 2 provides an indicative overview of some of the main minilateral groupings to have emerged within global nuclear weapons governance, with particular reference to the NPT as a cornerstone multilateral institution, during the period 1970–2020.[7] Groups detailed in Table 2 and discussed in this section all meet the characteristics of minilateralism detailed in the last section, having formed to overcome specific transnational governance problems within global nuclear weapons governance.[8] Following the pragmatist approach, the groups outlined in Table 2 offer pertinent observations of how minilateral groupings have emerged over time, the distinct purposes of minilateralism within and across the three pillars of the global nuclear order, their relationship to the NPT as its cornerstone, and the involvement of both nuclear- and non-nuclear weapon states in their initiation and participation. All minilateral groups included in Table 2 also continue to operate at time of writing.[9] The following sub-sections unpack these minilateral group dynamics, focusing primarily on the typology of *inside* and *outside* minilateralism, before addressing its shifting dynamics with examples of *outside-inside*, and *inside-outside* minilateralism.

Table 2. An indicative overview of minilateral group dynamics in global nuclear weapons governance (1970–2020).

Name and date of formation	Purpose	Participation	Type of minilateralism
Zangger Committee (1971)	To harmonize nuclear export controls and provide guidelines for all NPT States Parties.	Initially 15 nuclear supplier states, including nuclear and non-nuclear weapon states. Now includes 39 states.	Outside-Inside
Nuclear Suppliers Group (1975)	Providing guidelines for nuclear and nuclear-related exports, ensuring that nuclear trade for peaceful purposes does not contribute to nuclear proliferation.	US-initiated. Includes 48 nuclear supplier states.	Outside
Vienna Group of Ten (1980)	To make constructive and meaningful contributions to the NPT focusing on the "Vienna issues".	11 NPT non-nuclear weapon states.	Inside
Missile Technology Control Regime (1987)	Prevents the proliferation of WMD by setting limits on their delivery systems.	G7-initiated. Includes 35 states.	Outside
New Agenda Coalition (1998)	International consensus to progress the goal of nuclear disarmament, including through legal convention/ prohibition.	6 NPT non-nuclear weapon states.	Inside
Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) (2003)	Preventing the trafficking of WMD, their delivery systems and related materials.	US-initiated. Now endorsed by 111 states.	Outside
Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism (2006)	To strengthen global capacity to prevent, detect and respond to nuclear terrorism.	US and Russia-initiated. Includes 89 states, plus 6 international organizations.	Outside
UK-Norway Initiative (2007)/The Quad Nuclear Verification Partnership (Quad) (2015)	Demonstrating how multilateral nuclear disarmament verification could work and be implemented.	UK and Norway-initiated. Now includes UK, US, Norway and Sweden.	Outside-Inside
P5 Process (2009)	To advance mutual confidence-building measures on disarmament and non-proliferation issues, reaffirming commitment to the NPT and the fulfilment of Art VI.	The 5 NPT NWS	Inside-Outside
Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative (NPDI) (2022)	Practical steps to promote the consensus outcomes of the 2010 NPT Action Plan.	10 NPT non-nuclear weapon states.	Inside
Group of Sixteen/ Humanitarian Initiative (HI) (2012)	To advance the consensus outcomes of the 2010 NPT Action Plan concerning the "humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons."	Initially formed among 16 NPT non-nuclear weapon states. Snowballed to 159 states plus civil society advocating the Humanitarian Initiative	Inside-Outside Outside

(*Continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

Name and date of formation	Purpose	Participation	Type of minilateralism
International Partnership for Nuclear Disarmament Verification (IPNDV) (2014)	To identify gaps and technical challenges related to the monitoring and verification of nuclear disarmament.	US-initiated in partnership with the Nuclear Threat Initiative. Includes 25 states.	
Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND) (2018)	A "new dialogue" on the conditions necessary for nuclear disarmament to be met.	US-initiated. Includes 43 states, includes the P5 and NPT non-nuclear weapon states, in addition to non-NPT nuclear-weapon states India, Pakistan and Israel.	Inside-Outside
Stockholm Initiative for Nuclear Disarmament (2019)	To strengthen the NPT and to progress nuclear disarmament through a series of practical stepping stones.	16 states, all NPT non-nuclear weapon states.	Inside

Source: Author's own compilation.

Note: The GICNT paused all official meetings until further notice after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, though technically still operates. It is also noted that Russia has since withdrawn from the IPNDV and CEND Initiative.

Inside minilateralism

Inside minilateralism concerns those minilateral groupings that explicitly, and exclusively, form and integrate their activities *inside* a multilateral institution's own processes of negotiation and deliberation, directly participating in those proceedings as a primary forum for advancing collective action and overcoming transnational problems. There are multiple examples of inside minilateral groupings active in global nuclear weapons governance, each with particular reference to the NPT. Examples include the Vienna Group of Ten (VG10) (1980), New Agenda Coalition (NAC) (1998), Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative (NPDI) (2022) and the Stockholm Initiative for Nuclear Disarmament (2019). In each case, the group's primary purpose is to strengthen the NPT, particularly as it concerns the goal of pursuing nuclear disarmament and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, advancing multilateral negotiations and presenting practical measures for overcoming multilateral stagnation (German Federal Foreign Office, 2021; NAC, 1998; NPDI, 2022; Reaching Critical Will, 2017).

As previously discussed, minilateralism derives efficiency from the smaller numbers of states involved in decision-making. Interestingly, as groups with deliberately small numbers, the VG10, NAC, NPDI and Stockholm Initiative have all explicitly sought representation that derives legitimacy from two main sources: cross-regional representation, and the selection of NNWS states perceived to be both credible and proactive within the NPT. NAC

members comprise Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, and South Africa—all respected middle powers in their regions and each considered to have "authority and weight to speak on nuclear disarmament" (interview with NAC diplomat, March 2015).[10] NPDI members are considered "representative of their region, credible, transparent, and active in the NPT" (interview with NPDI diplomat, March 2015). The Stockholm Initiative is also composed of states "from all continents", a point which ensures that "individually [they] represent different regions. Together [they] represent a collective commitment to a world free of nuclear weapons" (German Federal Foreign Office, 2021). More than this these groups include states who are also members of other larger formal intergovernmental organizations and coalitions active within the NPT and other institutions, such as the Non-Aligned Movement, the Arab League, and the European Union, which then provides a crucial mechanism for bridge-building and information sharing between blocs of states (Dee, 2017). The cross-regional and cross-aligned representativeness of these groups further adds to their legitimacy in the eyes of other NPT States Parties because they can "develop a much broader approach to the negotiations that [isn't] just a western or northern perspective" (interview with NPDI diplomat, June 2015).

The VG10, NAC, NPDI and Stockholm Initiative are all ad hoc governance arrangements, with deliberately informal coordination and decision-making mechanisms and limited institutionalization. They have no formal structures, no secretariat or bureaucracy. They are capital-based, led by Ministers or senior diplomats and officials, with decisions made by consensus. They meet as groups principally to coordinate their activities ahead of NPT Review Conferences and/or during the negotiations themselves.

While the VG10, NAC, NPDI and Stockholm Initiative are exclusive in their membership, and do not open their meetings to others, their small size makes it easier for them to explore, innovate and deliberate practical measures for advancing NPT review negotiations. These activities and practical measures are then presented as working papers and high-level statements formally submitted during NPT review cycles, as well as in other multilateral institutions such as the UN First Committee, and with wider public access to those papers through the UNODA document database. In so doing these inside minilateral groupings aim to facilitate broader deliberation—and legitimization—of their coordination efforts among wider membership multilateral institutions.

Outside minilateralism

Outside minilateralism, by contrast, relates to the minilateral groupings that form and operate as forums distinctly, and principally, *apart* from existing

multilateral institutions. Within global nuclear governance some examples of outside minilateralism include the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) (1975), the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) (1987), the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) (2003), the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism (GICNT) (2006), and the International Partnership for Nuclear Disarmament and Verification (IPNDV) (2014). These groupings have many of the same characteristics.

In contrast to the examples of *inside* minilateralism discussed in the last section, all of which were initiated and led by NNWSs (and typically middle powers), the NSG, MTCR, PSI, GICNT, and IPNDV were all initiated and led by one or more NWS—be that the US (NSG, PSI, IPNDV), the US and Russia (GICNT), or France, the UK and US as part of the G7 industrialized states (MTCR). Each grouping is oriented towards providing tailored technical guidance or determining common principles to address specified proliferation and disarmament challenges within the global nuclear order. Each of these outside minilateral groupings were, as such, formed to provide some form of "institutional fix" to address identified weaknesses in the NPT regime (Davis Gibbons & Herzog, 2021, p. 62). The NSG is an early example of outside minilateral efforts pursued by the US, with cooperation from the Soviet Union, who worked with a selected membership of nuclear supplier states to plug an identified horizontal proliferation gap in the NPT regime.[11] The NSG thus specifically focuses its attentions on setting the standards for nuclear technology transfers. The MTCR later formed to focus on the standards for controlling missile technologies, the PSI on transferring or transporting WMD and their delivery systems, the GICNT on the prevention, detection and response to nuclear terrorism, while the IPNDV addresses the technical aspects of monitoring and verifying nuclear disarmament.

Each grouping offers regular formalized opportunities for participating governments to meet and deliberate, across varying levels. The NSG for example meets in a variety of formats from plenary sessions to consultative groups, expert groups, and informative exchange meetings (NSG, n.d.). The IPNDV is organized around three working groups that meet throughout the year, and which then report to an annual plenary meeting (IPNDV, n.d.). Each grouping comprises members who are broadly "like-minded" (US State Department, n.d.(b)). Membership is limited insofar as states must request to join and where they are prepared to meet the obligations or criteria of membership set by that group. The PSI, for example, was established by the US initially among a group of ten partner countries in 2003 but has since garnered the support of 111 states each "endorsing" the PSI Statement of Interdiction Principles (US State Department, n.d. (a)). Each grouping is also non-binding with little to no compliance or verification mechanisms. In contrast to established multilateral institutions, these outside minilateral

groupings are not grounded in formal treaties but remain as informal agreements or guidelines which participating governments then observe and implement "in accordance with national legislation and practice and on the basis of sovereign national discretion" (US State Department, n.d.(b)).

Important to highlight that, in contrast to inside minilateral groupings, outside minilateral groupings are frequently highlighted for their exclusivity and lack of transparency as deliberative and decision-making forums (Simpson, 2011). The NSG, for example, highlights that "non-NSG participants have … expressed concern about a perceived lack of transparency in the NSG's activities … and that the NSG has sought to deprive States of the benefits of nuclear technology or impose requirements on non-NSG participants, which have been made without their participation" (IAEA, 2022, pp. 9–10). The NSG, like the PSI, MTCR, and GICNT, meet confidentially believing that this "allows a frank discussion among participants to take place, which facilitates consensus decision-making" (IAEA, 2022, pp. 9–10). Such confidentiality nevertheless limits the perceived legitimacy of any outcomes these initiatives do then derive, particularly among non-participating governments who have little opportunity to observe, raise objections, or voice different perspectives. Being also predominantly US-led, when outside minilateral groupings have presented proposals to established multilateral institutions, they have then struggled to garner wider support (Matchett, 2021; Morse & Keohane, 2014, p. 402). Outside minilateral groupings thus remain as forums distinctly apart from established multilateral institutions, creating the patchwork of overlapping—at times—competing regimes at work within the global nuclear order. They serve explicit technical functions, have low bureaucratic costs, and limited compliance mechanisms. In short, they serve the particular interests of the NWS that initiated them.

Shifting minilateralism in global nuclear weapons governance

As previously discussed, minilateralism is a relational concept and must therefore be understood as a fluid praxis as sub-groups of states look to shift their activities and positioning towards established multilateral institutions. Outside minilateral groupings that form distinctly apart from multilateral institutions may still look to tailor their activities towards established multilateral institutions and integrate their efforts more deliberately into multilateral negotiations and deliberations (*outside-inside*). By the same logic, inside minilateral groupings may form within an established multilateral institution only to shift their activities outside of that institution where they become dissatisfied or otherwise seek to advance their interests in alternative forums (*inside-outside*). In the case of global nuclear weapons governance, both varieties of shifting minilateralism can be identified.

Outside-inside minilateralism

Much like other *outside* minilateral groupings, the Zangger Committee and Quad[12] are considered "bolt on" initiatives within the global nuclear order (Williams, 2020). As with other forms of outside minilateralism, the Zangger Committee and Quad were also formed with NWS involvement and with predominantly technical functions. Yet in seeming contrast to the outside minilateral groupings discussed in the last section, both the Zangger Committee and Quad have explicitly and consistently sought to integrate and promote their activities within the NPT. For example, when the Zangger Committee formed in 1971, it did so with the purpose of providing clearer definition of the NPT's article III, paragraph 2 concerning "equipment of material especially designed or prepared for the processing, use or production of special fissionable material" (UN, 1968). In contrast therefore to the NSG, which is more institutionalized, has a broader remit, and was also expressly advanced with the inclusion of non-NPT States Parties (Antsey, 2018), the Zangger Committee was positioned to serve as a "technical body" that "essentially contributes to the interpretation of article III, paragraph 2, of the Treaty and thereby offers guidance to all parties of the Treaty" (Zangger Committee, 2010).

The Quad meanwhile was formed among the US, UK, Norway and Sweden in 2014 with the purpose of demonstrating how multilateral nuclear disarmament verification could work in practical and technical terms. Close in remit to the IPNDV, though far narrower in its membership, the Quad is a collaborative minilateral grouping between nuclear and non-nuclear weapon states aimed at exploring the methods and means to "help solve verification and monitoring challenges related to nuclear disarmament" (Quad, n.d.). Unlike the IPNDV, the Quad regularly tailors its activities towards the NPT in order to demonstrate how it can "make a concrete contribution to the fulfilment of Article VI of the NPT" (Quad, n.d.).

Both the Zangger Committee and Quad regularly direct their activities towards the NPT and other multilateral institutions within the global nuclear order. Zangger Committee activities have been highlighted in nearly all NPT Review Conference documents dating back to 1975 (Zangger Committee, 2010), with its members also submitting regular working papers to NPT Preparatory Committees and Review Conferences updating NPT States Parties on their activities. The Zangger Committee moreover embeds its conditions of supply deliberately within the IAEA safeguards and verification regime, providing regular updates of its trigger list to the IAEA Director General.[13] The Quad also promotes its activities within multilateral institutions, delivering joint statements as well as working papers within the NPT review cycle. The Quad's current workstreams focused on verification strategies and technologies are moreover expected to be "integrated into a common, substantive deliverable … within the timeframe of the NPT 2025 review cycle." (Quad, n.d.).

The Zangger Committee and Quad therefore serve as particular examples of how states can pursue minilateralism *outside* of established multilateral institutions, but then integrate their activities *inside* the negotiation and deliberation processes of those institutions for the purpose of information-sharing, guidance, and wider multilateral deliberation.

Inside-outside minilateralism

Much as minilateralism may shift from outside-in, so too can states pursue minilateralism *inside* multilateral institutions then move their activities *outside* of those institutions (*inside-outside*). Three examples are highlighted of this variety of shifting minilateralism within the global nuclear order: the Group of 16 (G16), the P5 Process, and the CEND Initiative.

Like the NPDI, the G16 was formed after the 2010 NPT RevCon with the goal of advancing progress following the 2010 *Action Plan*. The G16 specifically highlighted the humanitarian dimension of nuclear disarmament and the necessity for all states to "intensify their efforts to outlaw nuclear weapons and achieve a world free of nuclear weapons" (Reaching Critical Will, 2012). While the G16 remained as a core group, their numbers soon snowballed into a larger Humanitarian Initiative (HI) with the active involvement of civil society (Schapper & Dee, 2024) and with joint statements, each with growing numbers of signatories, given at NPT Preparatory Committees in 2012, 2013, 2014 as well as the NPT Review Conference in 2015 (interview with G16 diplomat, June 2015).

While the G16 continued to integrate its activities into NPT review cycles, it was its activity *outside* of the NPT that set the G16/HI distinctly apart from other inside minilateral group dynamics (interview with G16 diplomat, June 2015). In 2012, G16 member Norway announced it would host an Intergovernmental Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons (HINW IGC). HINW IGCs were then also hosted by G16 members in Nayarit (2013) and Vienna (2014). At each IGC momentum for the humanitarian initiative grew, as did the belief that non-nuclear weapon states could best advance the goal of a nuclear weapon free world through new frameworks and forums.

The failed 2015 NPT Review Conference further bolstered G16/HI activities *outside* of the NPT in advancing diplomatic and legal measures to deliver a world free of nuclear weapons. The perceived intransigence of the P5 to take seriously the concerns of the Humanitarian Initiative, coupled with the argument developed over the course of the HINW IGCs that the very possession of nuclear weapons was a risk, and their use illegal, further amplified the view that a legal framework for the prohibition and subsequent elimination of nuclear weapons was now essential (Kmentt, 2015, p. 708). The Humanitarian Pledge—supported by over 120 states—was subsequently pursued—now *inside* the UN General Assembly, first as a UN Resolution

(78/40) in December 2015, and then as a working paper presented at the UN Open-Ended Working Group on Advancing Nuclear Disarmament in February 2016. In December 2016, the UN General Assembly adopted resolution 71/258 on taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations, and on 7 July the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) was adopted.

The G16/HI highlights how multilateral stagnation reinforced the perceived legitimacy deficit of the NPT as a multilateral institution capable of delivering a world free of nuclear weapons in the eyes of the NNWS. The result was their "mass defection" (Doyle, 2017), pursuing minilateralism *outside* of the NPT through the HINW IGCs, before then advancing a prohibition treaty *inside* the UN General Assembly where the NWS could not block. The result was competitive regime formation (Morse & Keohane, 2014) with the birth of the TPNW.

Shifting *inside-outside* minilateralism can also be identified in two attempts by the NWS to strengthen NPT multilateral negotiations and demonstrate their willingness to respond to the concerns of the NNWS on nuclear disarmament: namely the P5 Process and CEND Initiative. The P5 Process was first proposed by the UK government in a statement to the Conference on Disarmament in 2008. The goal was to offer a means of technical deliberation between the P5 on nuclear disarmament verification (Hoell & Persbo, 2020)[14]. When the P5 Process formally launched in London in 2009, it was highlighted as a "critical time" for bringing the P5 together in a way that would "convince non-nuclear weapon states in the context of the NPT that they were taking their obligations under the treaty very seriously" (House of Lords, 2019, p. 36). After the 2010 NPT RevCon the P5 further agreed to annually review their implementation of the NPT *Action Plan* (Hoell & Persbo, 2020), including submitting individual national reports to the NPT review conference. The P5 Process has also been able to produce working papers or joint statements that are then delivered during NPT review cycles, although these are more of an occasional rather than regular practice, being largely contingent on which P5 state is chairing the Process and whether all P5 states are then willing to work towards, and endorse, common P5 language.

Typically, internal coordination and deliberation within the P5 Process occurs through their own high-level annual conference, twice-yearly principals meetings, ad hoc ambassadorial meetings held in Geneva around the UN and Conference on Disarmament, and through expert-level working groups (Hoell & Persbo, 2020). When geopolitical tensions and mistrust between the P5 heighten, however, the P5 Process is limited to lower-level intra-P5 meetings only[15] with little to no joint activities then advanced within NPT review negotiations, particularly as it concerns outreach to other NPT states parties. At such times the P5 Process shifts into the characteristics of other outside

minilateral groupings, being distinctly apart from established multilateral institutions, meeting in its own forums and with limited transparency. The P5 Process has subsequently been criticized for being "secretive" and "unnecessarily opaque" (Hoell & Persbo, 2020, p. 10), and which risks becoming "a 'cartel' of Nuclear Weapon States, simply lecturing others on why their continued possession of these weapons is justified" (House of Lords, 2019, p. 37). Despite this, the P5 Process is considered "an important initiative in nuclear diplomacy, which could play a positive role in coordinating the implementation by the five NWS of their NPT commitments" (House of Lords, 2019, p. 38).

In a similar vein, the CEND initiative was a minilateral grouping first proposed by the US government in 2018 as an effort to "jumpstart progress towards disarmament in the lead-up to the May 2020 Review Conference of the NPT" (Williams, 2020). CEND was originally presented as a series of US working papers to the NPT 2018 and 2019 Preparatory Committees. Links to the NPT nevertheless soon dissipated, with CEND activities then oriented towards a new dialogue on creating an environment conducive to nuclear disarmament. Interestingly, much like the G16 and other inside minilateral groupings, CEND deliberately selected its members "on the basis of both regional and political diversity" (Meyer, 2019, p. 10) garnering some legitimacy by comprising a diverse cross-regional membership of NPT nuclear weapon states and non-nuclear weapon states. The inclusion of non-NPT nuclear weapon states, Israel, India and Pakistan nevertheless situated CEND outside of the NPT framework to serve as a broader "open forum" (Burford et al., 2019) to discuss the advancement of nuclear disarmament.

Scholars and policy analysts are divided over CEND's expected utility and complementarity to the NPT and other existing multilateral institutions within global nuclear weapons governance. According to Williams (2020), for example, CEND would "not come at a cost to the NPT but rather … contribute to the common causes of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation" being seen to "complement rather than compete with the existing fora". For others however, CEND is a cause for concern because of the risk that it will side-track multilateral deliberations on nuclear disarmament (Burford et al., 2019) establishing a competitive forum which bypasses the NPT and its multilateral challenges.[16] As Davis Gibbons (2019) has also highlighted, of the fifteen different topics CEND set out to deliberate, most "should or could be addressed in other existing groups", including the NPT.

Question marks should also be raised over the lack of transparency and accountability in CEND's deliberations since its initiation in 2018. In contrast to the G16/HI, civil society involvement with CEND is limited and tightly controlled (Potter, 2019). While CEND's informality, closed door deliberations, and small numbers may ensure a freer dialogue (Williams,

2020) potentially leading to the sort of innovative approaches anticipated of more "flexible" multilateralism (HLAB, 2023—Table 1), neither its meetings, deliberations nor outputs are well publicized. References to CEND within the NPT's review cycle, including by the US, have also markedly dissipated since the 2019 NPT PrepCom suggesting that, from a cynical perspective, "little of substance will come from the effort" (Davis Gibbons, 2019). Without transparency moreover, any deliverables that CEND generates will only face their own legitimacy deficit—not least from non-participating governments who will struggle to find any "collective ownership" (Burford et al., 2019) of its outputs. In short, as CEND shifts away from the NPT it risks replicating the same challenges attributed to other outside minilateral groupings, namely lack of transparency and the invariable legitimacy deficit of *multilateralizing* any progress it achieves.

Conclusions and recommendations

It has been the aim of this article to examine the relationship between minilateralism and multilateralism within the global nuclear order. It asked the question: *how and under what conditions do states pursue minilateralism in the global nuclear order?* By unpacking the scholarship around the effective mini- vs. multilateral dilemma, the challenges for multilateralism in the global nuclear order, and the conceptualization of minilateralism as a relational and fluid typology addressing forms of *inside*, *outside, outside-inside* and *inside-outside* minilateralism, traced across global nuclear weapons governance from 1970 to 2020, this analysis can now present the following conclusions.

A first key takeaway is that how states pursue minilateralism in the global nuclear order is conditional on the perceived effectiveness and legitimacy of established multilateral institutions. Different types of minilateralism serve distinct purposes in how effective multilateralism is itself perceived and pursued within global nuclear weapons governance. *Inside* minilateralism, as demonstrated by the VG10, NAC, NPDI and Stockholm Initiative, is pursued explicitly, and exclusively, within established multilateral institutions with the express goal of upholding and advancing the intended goals of the NPT as a cornerstone multilateral institution. Inside minilateral groupings seek therefore to ensure multilateral institutions not only remain "fit for purpose", but are working to find collective solutions, particularly as it concerns multilateral progress towards nuclear disarmament. *Outside* minilateralism, as demonstrated by the NSG, MCTR, PSI, GICNT, and IPNDV by contrast, is pursued explicitly apart from established multilateral institutions, with the goal of overcoming perceived weaknesses or (oftentimes technical) challenges within those institutions, to advance new rules, guidelines or principles among the participating governments, and to serve

as alternative deliberative forums. Whereas inside minilateralism seeks then to complement effective multilateralism by strengthening established multilateral institutions, outside minilateralism is concerned with sustaining and strengthening the global nuclear order by adding to the complex set of institutions, norms, and practices that govern nuclear weapons, materials and technologies.

Second, whereas many *inside* minilateral groupings garner legitimacy from their deliberate cross-regional memberships, as well as their close integration within established multilateral institution negotiation and deliberation processes, *outside* minilateral groupings have more limited transparency and accountability and thus face a greater legitimacy deficit among non-participant governments. A related takeaway is that nearly all *outside* minilateral groupings in the global nuclear order are NWS-initiated and led and which tend, therefore, to conform with the realist argument that states with the greatest material power, in pursuit of their own advantage, will advance coordination activities where they can best control outcomes while avoiding freeriding by weaker states (Kahler, 1992). For the NWS, and particularly the US, this has meant the pursuit of minilateralism is principally through alternative forums with selective memberships which bypass wider membership multilateral decision-making processes and the states (including other NWS) most likely to block or impede their interests. By contrast, almost all *inside* minilateral groupings are NNWS/middle power led, persistently prioritize the need for minilateral solutions to receive "broader deliberation and adoption" (HLAB, 2023) and proactively integrate their activities, if not their internal discussions, within wider membership multilateral institutions. This further complements the view that middle powers naturally favor the advancement and advocacy of effective—and resilient—multilateralism (Park, 2022), adding to their perceived legitimacy.

Third, minilateralism does not always stay inside or outside of established multilateral institutions but can be observed as a fluid praxis with shifting activities. Where *inside* minilateral groupings shift their activities *outside* of multilateral institutions, such as in the examples of the G16/HI and CEND initiative, this has been a result of the perceived effectiveness and legitimacy deficit within the NPT courtesy of its multilateral stagnation and contestation. The result is new regimes or forums being established. The extent to which these new regimes then help or hinder effective multilateralism is highly contested however and remains a point for continued research and review. On the one hand, the activities of the G16/HI leading to the adoption of the TPNW has, in many respects, replicated some of the HLAB criteria for effective multilateralism. On the other hand, the TPNW is criticized for deepening the schism between the nuclear "haves" and "have nots", entrenching multilateral stalemate, and undermining the NPT and other established multilateral institutions in the global nuclear

order. CEND moreover, raises the prospect of the US taking on a more proactive role in advancing multilateral nuclear disarmament efforts, but then mirrors many of the same outside minilateral characteristics—particularly in terms of limited transparency—which question its legitimacy. The chances of any minilateral CEND deliverable being "broadly deliberated and adopted" (HLAB, 2023; Table 1) at the wider multilateral level is thus limited.

Lessons of best practice can meanwhile be drawn from the example of the Zangger Committee and Quad. While established as *outside* "bolt on" minilateral groups apart from multilateral institutions, the Zangger Committee and Quad deliberately seek to integrate their activities within NPT review cycles and other multilateral institutions. In this regard the Zangger Committee and Quad serve as particular examples of how groups that comprise nuclear weapon states can pursue minilateralism in ways that better tackle the multilateralism-legitimacy nexus and complement more effective multilateral institutions.

Building on these takeaways, and returning to the HLAB (2023) criteria for effective multilateralism detailed in Table 1, several recommendations can be made for ensuring that minilateralism better complements effective multilateralism in global nuclear weapons governance and beyond:

1. Minilateralism invariably challenges the inclusive character of multilateralism as the need for efficient decision-making demands smaller numbers of decision-makers. Yet for effective multilateralism to be *flexible* and *representative* (Table 1) minilateral groupings must also pay due attention to their perceived legitimacy and whether their activities will garner collective ownership by non-participating governments when they do seek to *multilateralize*. As the examples of inside minilateralism in global nuclear weapons governance highlight, cross-regional memberships of proactive and credible states provide both a degree of "meaningful representation" and amplified legitimacy within established multilateral institutions. Within the NPT, where this practice already takes place, minilateral groupings might further enhance that legitimacy by looking to include other representative states, particularly from TPNW supporters in the global South who, whether due to financial restraint or lack of opportunity, have not been counted among the most credible and proactive within the NPT, yet who have an important voice in their region.
2. States pursuing outside minilateralism can complement more effective multilateralism by ensuring their activities are *transparent*. This is not to suggest that minilateral groupings start holding open meetings. In fact, there are distinct benefits from closed room deliberations in facilitating free-flowing dialogue that could lead to innovations and

problem-solving solutions. Minilateral groups should though, at a minimum, seek to publicize their meeting dates and locations and provide regular reporting on their deliberations and outputs so that non-participating governments and civil society are not left in the dark. One mechanism for doing so is to draw on the example of the NSG, Zangger Committee, Quad and IPNDV in developing—and regularly updating—a dedicated website to offer some transparency of process. In the case of global nuclear weapons governance more specifically, the UN Office of Disarmament Affairs might also look to establish a group filter on their public calendar of events, enabling both multilateral institutional meetings and minilateral group meetings to be publicized in the same space.

3. Minilateralism can serve to complement more *transparent* and *accountable* multilateralism only where groups are willing and able to integrate their activities within the deliberative and negotiation functions of established multilateral institutions. Outside minilateral groupings who persistently remain apart can expect to experience a legitimacy deficit when they do then attempt to integrate those activities within established multilateral institutions, not least when looking for "broader deliberation and adoption". Lessons should particularly be drawn here from inside minilateral groupings, as well as outside-inside minilateral groups such as the Zangger Committee and Quad. These examples showcase how minilateral groupings can not only integrate their activities within established multilateral institutions, e.g., through the regular submission of working papers, formal statements, reports and hosting side events, but also uphold and promote the continued relevance, legitimacy and significance of established multilateral institutions and their wider membership.

Notes

1. See Friedrichs and Kratochwil (2009) for a defense of the pragmatist methodology, including abduction whereby the scholar trusts that a phenomenon is not random, collects pertinent observations, and applies concepts from existing fields of knowledge.
2. This is not to discount the importance of multilateral institutions delivering results. A process-oriented focus nevertheless enables more deliberate focus on the mini-multilateral relationship.
3. Discussed as "plurilateralism" in Oelgemöller (2011).
4. Consensus decision-making is also a major cause of multilateral paralysis in the Conference on Disarmament (Meyer, 2019).
5. The DPRK withdrew from the NPT in 2003 to develop its nuclear weapons program. Iran is a signatory of the NPT yet also remains a pressing proliferation concern.

6. Similar concerns are emerging of Russia proactively blocking the efforts of western powers within the Conference on Disarmament and UN First Committee.
7. This period spans the NPT's entry into force through to its fiftieth anniversary. Table 2 is intended to offer an overview of some of the main minilateral groupings to have emerged within global nuclear weapons governance during this period. It is not an exhaustive list of every minilateral grouping in this field of governance.
8. Other intergovernmental and regional organizations which operate across multiple policy fields and institutions e.g. the European Union, Arab League, or Non-Aligned Movement are not included for this reason.
9. Some more time-bound minilateral groupings have not been included for this reason, such as the E3 (France, Germany, the UK 2003–2005), the EU3 (E3 plus the EU High Rep for CFSP 2004–2015), the EU3+3/P5+1 (EU3 plus US, Russia and China 2006–2015), or the Nuclear Security Summit (US-led involving 47–53 states, 2010–2016). For more details on these minilateral groups see Gill (2020), Sauer (2019) and Harnisch (2007).
10. All data derived for author interviews over the period 2011–2015 received ethical approval from the University of Glasgow and University of Warwick respectively.
11. The gap concerned dual-use technologies, exemplified when India conducted a nuclear explosion using material and technology imported from the US and Canada intended for civilian purposes (see Davis Gibbons & Herzog, 2021).
12. The Quad here refers to the Quad Nuclear Verification Partnership, not to be confused with the Quad in Asia grouping (Japan, India, Australia and United States).
13. The NSG also demonstrates some of these inside characteristics by providing annual updates of its own trigger list and activities to the IAEA.
14. Please make sure to capitalize July (also later on in this paragraph)
15. As was the case in 2017 and 2018 (Hoell & Persbo, 2020), and since 2022 following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
16. For the US this includes the challenge of Russia blocking their efforts, especially since Russia withdrew from CEND in 2022.

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