

Multilateral Diplomacy, Norm Building, and UN Conferences: The Case of Small Arms and Light Weapons

United Nations General Assembly, “Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects,” 20 July 2001. Reproduced in UN document A/CONF. 192/1.5.

At about 6:00 A.M. on Saturday, 21 July 2001, after two weeks of difficult negotiations and several years of preparation, delegates at UN headquarters in New York agreed on the “Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects” (hereafter “Programme of Action”).^[sup1] Consensus was reached only after the African delegations, in late-night discussions, agreed to abandon attempts to have the draft program include references to the need to regulate the civilian possession of weapons and to restrict weapons transfers to nonstate actors. The final statement by the conference president, Ambassador Camilo Reyes of Colombia, expressed his “disappointment over the Conference’s inability to agree — due to the concerns of one state — on language recognizing the need to establish and maintain controls over private ownership of these deadly weapons, and the need for preventing sales of such arms to nonstate groups.” The “one state” was, not surprisingly, the United States.

Some called the agreed “Programme of Action” “unprecedented” or “path-breaking”; others concluded that the conference was a “failure” or a “missed opportunity.” Press reports and public commentary told a familiar story: the last-minute intransigence of the United States (which almost blocked final consensus), the silent opposition of states such as China, the activism of the European Union (EU) and like-minded states, the persistent resistance of the Arab League to concrete measures, and the impassioned pleas of affected states — this time mainly in Africa. With some modifications, a version of this story could be told about the negotiations leading to the Kyoto protocol on global warming, the International Criminal Court, the Ottawa process leading to the treaty banning antipersonnel land mines, and other, less prominent, issues on the multilateral agenda.

But for scholarly observers of the process, these are perhaps not the most interesting parts of the story. In this review essay, I examine the decade-long effort to put the issue of small arms and light weapons on the international security agenda and to develop concrete measures to deal with their deadly consequences in different contexts around the world. I use the UN small arms conference experience and focus on its “Programme of Action” and related documents to discuss several questions important to students of multilateralism and global governance:^[sup2]

How should scholars understand the documentary record left by UN conferences, and how much can it tell us about multilateral diplomacy in an issue area?

Does participation in conference diplomacy shape state interests, or are such processes better understood as bargaining games between actors with exogenous or fixed interests?

What is the role of nongovernmental actors in such multilateral processes?

To what extent does the UN serve as a site for global norm building?

A conventional academic review essay would not analyze the primary source material (documents) that is required to answer these questions, but rather the contributions of the existing literature. With a few exceptions, however, this literature does not yet exist in the area of small arms. For such a literature to develop it will require drawing upon research that is more fully developed in other issue areas (global environmental and human rights policy, for example) and making use of the available primary materials on small arms to advance a coherent research agenda. My focus on the “Programme of Action” as the centerpiece of multilateral efforts is justified by the central role such documents play in the creation and dissemination of new norms. My aim, however, is not to dissect the “Programme of Action” but to show how such documents (and indeed the entire documentary record available to scholars) must be set in a rich empirical context. Historians understand well this need — international relations scholars seemingly less so.

Since this review is neither a full-fledged research article nor a formal discourse analysis, it raises but cannot answer comprehensively the questions I pose above. But by tracing the process leading up to and through the conference, I hope to help scholars come to grips with the tangled web of multilateral

diplomacy in this area.

What Did the UN Small Arms Conference Achieve?

How should scholars evaluate the objectives and achievements of a UN conference? In the most ambitious formulation, the small arms conference was to produce a document with concrete commitments that would allow the

develop[ment] and implementation of] agreed international measures to prevent, combat and eradicate illicit manufacturing of and trafficking in small arms and light weapons, ... [as well as] strengthening or developing agreed norms and measures, ... mobilizing the political will ... to prevent and combat illicit transfers and manufacturing ... and promoting responsible action by States. (Par. I.22)

Like other similar conferences on population, environment, human rights, and social development, the underlying goals were to “frame” the future debate in ways that defined the nature of the problem and highlighted certain dimensions of it (while excluding or occluding others); to provide a tool for “policy entrepreneurs” (both governmental and nongovernmental) to mobilize national and multilateral resources; and to serve as a baseline for promoting the development of international and national norms in a given issue area. Naturally, which framing or which norms one prefers depends in some way on how one defines and pursues one's interests.

But how were these public and underlying goals to be achieved? The main axis of disagreement from the very beginning, and an issue on which the “Programme of Action” represents a clear advance, is the issue of how licit and illicit trafficking are linked. The title of the conference revealed this tension. It was primarily concerned with the “illicit trade in small arms and light weapons,” but as early as a 1997 UN expert panel,³ those states intent on seriously tackling the issue recognized that in order to curtail the illicit trade, measures that addressed legal production and trade would be required. Virtually every illicit small arms that is used in conflict or criminal activity began its life as a legally produced and traded weapon, at some point slipping into the illicit circuit. The phrase “in all its aspects” in the conference title thus in principle opened the way to a wide-ranging examination of all aspects of the production, stockpiling, and trade in small arms and light weapons. Even if only limited progress was achieved in specific areas, this in itself can be said to have brought small arms and light weapons fully into the international peace and security arena.

The “Programme of Action” contains a preamble and three substantive sections. The preamble was hotly contested in three areas: the definition of small arms and light weapons, the consequences that were attributed to their “excessive accumulation and uncontrolled spread,” and the linkage of small arms to human rights violations. While these sorts of disputes may seem scholastic, their outcome is important both for framing the problem and for developing norms around it. Because no definition of small arms and light weapons is given, the subsequent measures discussed are not automatically restricted to military-style weapons (that is, fully automatic and designed to military specification), although many states explicitly or implicitly adopted either a narrow or a wide definition. A host of negative consequences are linked to small arms and light weapons proliferation, providing a broad mandate for measures to address the problem. There is, however, no mention of human rights in the preamble.

The substantive sections of the “Programme of Action” commit states to numerous measures at the national, regional, and global levels, touching the illicit and licit trade, production, and holdings of small arms and light weapons. The most important of these are:

Enhancing national legislation and regulation concerning production and transfer of small arms and light weapons.

Ensuring that manufacturers mark all weapons (and keep appropriate records) to allow national authorities to identify and trace seized weapons.

Promoting (on a voluntary basis) increased transparency in small arms production and trade.

Improving the system of end-user certificates to diminish the risk of diversion and illicit trafficking.

Encouraging the destruction of weapons seized in criminal investigations, collected in post-conflict disarmament programs, or deemed surplus to national requirements.

Increasing the physical security of small arms stocks to prevent leakage from national holdings.
Convening a review conference in 2006.

How then should one judge the achievements of the UN conference? If taken at face value, and as a set of normative standards for states, the document presents an ambitious and far-reaching program.

If compared to the multilateral “state of play” even five years ago, it is also evident that a relatively large consensus (geographically and politically) has emerged that the unconstrained availability of small arms and light weapons ought to be addressed as a problem in itself, and that small arms represent, in a sense, “independent variables” susceptible to concrete policy measures that will help achieve broader peace and security goals.

The problem of small arms is framed through the attribution of a wide range of possible negative consequences to their proliferation and use. These include increasing the intensity of contemporary conflicts, diminishing the security of vulnerable groups (such as women and children, refugees, and internally displaced persons), increasing the violence associated with large-scale criminal activity (and the concomitant burden on the criminal justice system), eroding development gains and the prospects for socioeconomic development, undermining respect for human rights, threatening humanitarian relief operations and workers, and increasing the public health burden associated with firearms violence. In every case, small arms and light weapons are implicated in complex causal pathways with these various problems, although little work has yet been done to trace systematically these pathways to assess the relative weight of small arms (compared to other factors) or to evaluate the effectiveness of particular policy measures. But, as in all areas of public policy, the first steps are to recognize the possible negative consequences of a particular phenomenon, define it as a “problem,” and create a consensus that different policy avenues need to be explored. On these dimensions, the UN conference was a success.

There are, however, three considerations that temper this positive assessment. First, the document's language is non-constraining, leaving large margins for states to exercise discretion or interpretation via such clauses as “where applicable,” “as appropriate,” “where needed,” or “on a voluntary basis.” Second, many important issues were not tackled or included in the “Programme of Action.” These include concrete commitments to

Negotiate an international mechanism to trace illicit small arms (only a UN feasibility study was agreed).

Regulate the civilian possession of weapons.

Increase transparency in the production, stockpiling, and trade in small arms and light weapons.

Agree on specific criteria (that is, a code of conduct) governing authorized exports.

Negotiate agreements to regulate arms brokering.^[sup4]

Finally, documents themselves, however well crafted, do not in themselves destroy surplus weapons, secure stockpiles, punish illicit traffickers, or increase the security of vulnerable groups. Ultimately, this means that the “Programme of Action” can only be evaluated if its framing and norm-setting function becomes a benchmark for a broader multilateral (and national) process. As much of the literature on norms in world politics notes, only if concrete measures are implemented nationally and multilaterally (that is, states change their behavior in tangible ways) can one deem a norm-setting exercise such as the UN conference a success.^[sup5]

Shaping State Interests: The Multilateral Process Leading to the 2001 Conference

States became engaged in negotiations over these issues well before the UN conference began. The formal process began with the convening of the Preparatory Committee (Prepcom) in February-March 2000, the presentation of a negotiating document (A/CONF. 192/PC/L.4) in December 2000, and extensive consultations at, before, and after the second and third meetings of the Prepcom in January and March 2001. But some of the controversial issues that bedeviled the conference at the very end had been mooted long before. With respect to the issue of transfers to nonstate actors, for example, Canada proposed as early as 1998 an international instrument banning the transfer of weapons to nonstate actors, only to abandon the initiative in the face of opposition from, among others, representatives of the nongovernmental organizations (NGO) community.^[sup6]

A detailed tracing of the evolution of the final document, and states' positions on the many different subissues, is beyond the scope of this analysis.^[sup7] From a theoretical perspective, however, the important issue is whether or not state positions on any aspects of small arms and light weapons changed as a result of participation in the multilateral negotiating process. Changes, if they pass a certain threshold of significance (here undefined), would prima facie provide evidence for a key constructivist claim that

state interests evolve throughout negotiation and dialogue.^[sup8] By contrast, if the outcome of the conference can be explained simply by examining the initial position of states, plus their relative power (either as bargaining power or within the international system), then rationalist modes of explanation should be privileged. In either case, a careful study of the documentary record (supplemented by other sources, such as interviews) is indispensable to resolving the debate between rationalist and constructivist claims. A major problem in such research is that one often does not have sufficient access to the documentary record, and hence the fallback is to post facto impute interests from outcomes, a move that privileges rationalist over constructivist explanations and effectively closes off other historical possibilities.

When one examines some of the major issues that the “Programme of Action” addressed (or failed to address), it is clear that certain states or groups of states had relatively fixed negotiating positions (reflecting their predefined interests) that did not evolve throughout the actual negotiations. For example, the U.S. insistence as early as the second Prepcorn (January 2001) on the exclusion of the two final issues — civilian possession and nonstate actors — would seem to confirm the realist principle that the strong do what they wish, even, in this case, in the face of what the conference chair described as “overwhelming support” for some concrete references to these issues. With respect to the issue of marking and tracing, states such as China made clear their opposition to any mandate for negotiating an international instrument, and the “Programme of Action” only mandated an expert study to “examine the feasibility of developing an international instrument” (par. IV. 1(c)). And the states of the Arab League (in particular Egypt and Algeria) made clear their opposition to increased transparency and to any measures that could infringe on national sovereignty in such areas as the determination of surplus stocks or export criteria that might restrict their ability to import weapons.

But an exclusive focus on the way in which specific issues were resolved during the actual negotiations in the Prepcorn and UN conference is incomplete. The multilateral negotiating process includes not only the actual UN conference and Prepcorn, but the entire process of mobilization and policy formulation within and between states. An adequate constructivist account must therefore operate at two levels: it must not only analyze multilateral interactions to see if state interests (and actions) change, but it must examine the (re)construction of interests at the domestic level (we could call this “two-level constructivism”). In this case, a whole host of regional and national workshops and conferences were convened to influence the formulation of state policies on small arms and to mobilize domestic nongovernmental actors and interests. Many states were on a relatively steep learning curve, not even having a clearly defined policy on small arms and light weapons before the mid-or late 1990s. The UN conference document provides a partial list of more than fifty high-level seminars and conferences in the three years preceding the conference. In some cases, these meetings were crucial in identifying important issues (and disagreements over them), shaping state policies, and formulating regional positions in such areas as the regulation of arms brokering, destruction of surplus stocks, international assistance, and so forth. Under these conditions, it is difficult if not impossible to claim that scholars can “read off state interests from some straightforward assessment of a state's relative position in the policy arena in question. There are not even clear criteria by which such a position could be determined: should, for example, it focus on the most negatively affected states (that is, expect active engagement from those states affected by illicit arms flows or by high levels of firearms violence that threatens state capacities), or on the economic and geostrategic benefits of arms exports and imports (that is, assume that major exporters and importers would oppose restraints)?

Two examples, from Africa and the EU, can highlight how this process of interest formation worked.^[sup9] In the mid-1990s there existed only partial engagement across Africa with the issue of small arms, the two most prominent early actors having been Mali and South Africa. Mali became engaged with the issue when President Alpha Oumar Konaré took the lead in implementing a postconflict weapons collection and destruction program in 1994. This was instrumental in generating interest for the first UN expert group study (and for UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali to call for “micro-disarmament”) and for the West African moratorium on light weapons imports and exports (which took effect in the Economic Community of West African States [ECOWAS] region in 1998). Postapartheid South Africa became seized of the issue in light of its experience with rising crime and small arms proliferation and the problems posed by the large numbers of weapons that were circulating in southern Africa as a result of the Angolan and Mozambican conflicts. International attention (in large part fueled by NGO reports) began with an analysis of arms flows to the génocidaires in Rwanda and subsequent UN investigations and action on arms flows to Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Angola.^[sup10]

But it was only in 1999 that the Organization of African Unity (OAU) began a series of subregional workshops, organized in collaboration with the Institute for Security Studies (a South African-based research NGO) and the UN Regional Disarmament Center in Lomé, to raise the profile of the issue in governmental circles and to develop a common African position on small arms. The process culminated in the Bamako Declaration of December 2000, a key document for the subsequent UN process that was approved at the ministerial level by OAU member states.^[sup11] This document was crucial because a number of North African states (in particular, Egypt and Algeria) “bought into” specific language that was then used within the UN conference (and that tempered somewhat the Arab states' opposition to certain elements of the “Programme of Action”).

The shaping of state interests and policies within the EU also predates the UN conference process. In 1997, the council of the EU agreed on the “Programme for Preventing and Combating Illicit Trafficking in Conventional Arms”; in 1998, it developed the EU “Code of Conduct on Arms Exports”; and in December 1998, the council agreed on the “Joint Action” (a legally binding measure requiring national implementation).^[sup12] Despite the fact that only the latter has legal force, there have been several direct consequences of these policies. First, the EU pursued a strong position at the UN conference and advocated specific reference to the need to develop and respect export criteria, to negotiate legally binding instruments on arms brokering and on illicit weapons tracing, and to encourage greater transparency in the export and import of small arms and light weapons. The EU had to abandon its strong position in the conference endgame, but these positions reflected a definition of state interests that was quite different than that of the United States. Second, individual EU states have pursued even more active policies to stem small arms proliferation, including greater transparency concerning arms exports and policies (France has made noteworthy progress in this regard), the destruction of surplus weapons (the Netherlands), and assistance to affected states in East Central Europe. Finally, the EU has initiated technical and financial assistance projects (such as in Albania and Cambodia) for weapons collection and destruction. In all of these cases, one can demonstrate that state interests have changed; in the absence of the multilateral process and the attention it drew to the topic of small arms and light weapons, it is unlikely that these initiatives, individually or together, would have been pursued.^[sup13] Further, insofar as some EU states (notably Britain and France) would be assumed by structural realists to have geopolitical interests similar to those of the United States, these differences in how state interests are defined challenge structural realist accounts of interest formation that exclude domestic processes and the possible influence of transnational or multilateral actors on them.

Two broader lessons can be drawn from this. First, the specification of the initial interests (or positions) of states is often difficult, especially in areas that are relatively new on the policy agenda. But in the absence of a clear prior articulation of interests, it is almost true by definition that these interests are constructed, at both the domestic and multilateral levels. Second, and more important for our purposes, the multi-lateral process had an important impact on this process of interest construction. It may not have determined them in a strong sense, but for most states (with the notable exception of the United States), being enmeshed in multilateral processes, whether in the EU, OAU, OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), or OAS (Organization of American States), led to the adoption of positions and commitments that would otherwise have been difficult to imagine. The well-developed regional processes in fact led in almost all cases to more concrete or specific language and commitments than did the global UN process.

The Role and Influence of Nongovernmental Actors

National and transnational NGOs were very active in the process leading up to the UN conference. Beginning in 1997, a group of Washington and London-based NGOs, building to some extent on the experience of the campaign to ban antipersonnel land mines, began mobilizing around the small arms issue. By the end of 1998, roughly 150 organizations and individuals were active in the NGO network that became (in October 1998) the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA). By the time of the UN conference, about 320 organizations and individuals from seventy states were members of IANSA. More than 170 NGOs requested accreditation to the UN conference (with well over 100 individual participants actually in New York), and the topic of NGO participation generated a great deal of controversy in the Prepcom. States concerned about the precedent set by the Ottawa process (resulting in the treaty banning antipersonnel land mines) were determined to limit (and succeeded in limiting) the participation and access of NGOs along more traditional UN lines (for example, public gallery access during the open sessions, no access during “negotiating sessions,” one morning devoted to NGO presentations). The formal role NGOs played was in this sense limited, although the conference provided extensive opportunities for informal lobbying and information exchanges, and several states included

NGO representatives on their national delegations.

But the scholarly question is: To what extent (and how) did national or transnational NGOs affect the outcome or process of the UN conference and the broader development of the small arms agenda? The answer depends on how one defines influence, on what issues one focuses, and at what level NGO influence is alleged to be exercised (or not). NGO influence can be exercised either directly as an input into a particular outcome (bargaining power), or indirectly as the power to frame or structure the debate around a particular issue (agenda setting or structural power).[sup14] NGO influence can also be exercised at the grassroots, national, regional, or global level. There is no a priori reason to focus on only one of these types of influence or levels of activity, since such an approach risks occluding the arena in which NGO action may be most effective. More important, one of the hallmarks of contemporary transnational NGO activity is its seamless crossing of the domestic-international divide, through coalitions and activity at multiple levels. The Institute for Security Studies (ISS) in South Africa or Viva Rio in Brazil, for example, played an important role in domestic policy formulation (advocating or even helping to draft new domestic gun control legislation) and were influential advocates at the UN level and within NGO networks. The experience of the UN conference suggests that NGO influence was perhaps more important at the national than at the global level, and that it was more effective in agenda setting than in achieving particular outcomes.[sup15]

At the global level, the broad “proregulation” NGO coalition (IANSA) pursued goals that mirrored those of the maximalist governments, with perhaps more emphasis on the humanitarian and human rights dimension of the problem of small arms and light weapons. This was reflected in IANSA's written responses to two of the drafts of the “Programme of Action.” The final document did not, however, incorporate key IANSA positions, and the coalition expressed disappointment that “a number of critical commitments have been left out of the final program of action-measures which would have a real impact in preventing guns falling into the wrong hands.” These included the above-mentioned commitment to negotiate international instruments on arms brokering and on weapons marking and tracing; on references to regulating the civilian possession of weapons and to protecting human rights; and on increasing transparency in the trade in small arms and light weapons.[sup16]

Nevertheless, it would again be wrong to conclude that NGOs had little or no influence on the formulation of the multilateral agenda or on national positions on small arms and light weapons issues. With respect to the development of a common African position, for example, the ISS in South Africa participated actively (and often behind the scenes) in the drafting of the Bamako Declaration and lobbied a variety of African governments to develop strong and coherent positions on small arms issues. In East Africa, the high-profile role played by the Kenyan government appears to be due not only to the impact that small arms are having within that country (as a result of spillover from conflicts in the Horn of Africa and Great Lakes region), but also to extensive NGO activity and NGO-government contacts in the region (and in Nairobi itself).[sup17] The EU position does appear to have been influenced to some extent by the efforts of major NGOs in Britain, Germany, and (to a lesser extent) France.[sup18] Overall, NGOs appear to have exercised their influence by broadening the stakeholder base at the national and regional levels, by pushing governments to develop policies where none exist, and by raising the level of awareness and expertise that states can bring to the negotiating table. In at least one case (Bulgaria), NGO pressure (“naming and shaming”) contributed to a shift in national policies.[sup19]

Perhaps ironically, the clearest case of NGO influence at the national level was the impact of the National Rifle Association (NRA) and various other groups from the U.S. firearms lobby on the U.S. position at the UN conference. Congressman Bob Barr, a member of the NRA board of directors, was on the U.S. delegation to the conference, and the U.S. position on civilian possession of firearms was clearly linked to the importance of these domestic lobby groups for the Bush government. Other states, during the conference process, explicitly sought to echo NGO “bottom lines” on particular issues (such as export criteria or arms brokering), but, as noted above, their efforts were not always successful. Either way, these examples highlight the way state interests are constructed, not given, or read off the structure of world politics. Paradoxically, the focus in international relations on Wendtian constructivism (systemic, or between states), or on elite-level foreign policy-making, has hindered the development of the fruitful line of research opened up by the transnational activities of NGOs.[sup20]

A somewhat thornier issue is the relationship between NGOs and states and the degree to which transnational NGO activity can be understood as independent of state interests, in particular the interests of so-called like-minded states.[sup21] Most of the funding for NGOs activities has to date come from a

core group of states. The most prominent funders (of such major projects as Biting the Bullet, IANSA, the Norwegian Initiative on Small Arms Transfers [NISAT], the Small Arms Survey, Saferworld, and the Institute for Strategic Studies) include (in alphabetical order) Belgium, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. In some cases (such as the founding of IANSA or NISAT), key officials in foreign ministries played a crucial catalytic role in NGO mobilization. For example, the first large-scale NGO meeting, held in July 1998, was sponsored by the Canadian government and the Ford Foundation and was explicitly designed to draft a campaign document for “complementary, cooperative and coordinated international action to respond more effectively to the political, social and humanitarian catastrophes wrought by the unrestrained diffusion of small arms around the globe.”^[sup22] This does not, of course, mean that NGO activism (or the issues on which NGOs lobbied) was dictated by states, and I have found no examples of such pressure being exercised. Nevertheless, from a broader perspective, the NGO network “maps onto” the concerns of like-minded states (usually middle powers) that provide support for it. It thus reflects a key feature of the “new multilateralism” in which the activities of NGOs and particular governments mutually reinforce each other, potentially increasing the leverage of both.

These examples highlight issues that have been raised in other studies of NGO influence and the uncertainty over how to study transnational NGO activity. Cases from the environment, human rights, landmines, and other issue areas show that there is currently no consensus on which conceptual framework is most appropriate for studying NGO influence; the options range from transnational social movement theory to epistemic communities, principled issue-networks, or interest group analysis.^[sup23] The experience of the UN small arms conference process does not clarify these choices, since virtually all of these dimensions were present. NGOs, individually and collectively, were active in providing research and expert analysis (“epistemic communities”) that played an important role in the framing of the problem; were linked as part of broader issue networks (in the area of public health and crime prevention or as humanitarian advocates, for example); and (especially for the firearms community) pursued traditional interest group lobbying strategies. It is probably inappropriate to consider NGO mobilization in this area through the lens of social movement theory (since in only a few cases, such as Gunfree South Africa or Viva Rio, does much activity occur at the grassroots level), but this too may be a matter of time and network development.

Conclusion: Multilateral Norm Building in World Politics

The relatively rapid rise in the issue of small arms and light weapons on the international agenda — and the “normative change” that has accompanied this — is the result of a complex constellation of factors, both material and ideational. Material changes would include the fact that multilateral peacekeeping operations, especially in the post-conflict phase, were increasingly confronted by the dangers posed by excessive accumulations of small arms, the shifting balance between interstate and intrastate conflicts (the latter characterized by a greater reliance on small arms and light weapons and higher levels of civilian casualties), and the increasing volume of weapons available as a result of military downsizing at the end of the Cold War. Ideational factors include the broadening of the concept of security to include a human dimension that has brought international oversight, transparency, and accountability to an issue previously entirely within the sovereign purview of states. The growing awareness among state and nonstate actors of the negative impact of small arms and light weapons on the achievement of their humanitarian, human rights, development, or public health goals also played an important role. A key insight of constructivist analysis needs to be kept in mind here; one cannot separate material and ideational elements. Whether small arms and light weapons are considered as a problem depends on the construction of a discourse that includes both normative (small arms availability is a human rights concern) and causal (small arms availability increases the costs and risks associated with humanitarian relief operations) claims, which must be woven together into a tapestry of interests informed by normative considerations.

But such aspects of multilateral diplomacy, and the entire domain of “global public policy” formulation, will likely remain an understudied and undertheorized area of research for two basic reasons, one practical and one conceptual.^[sup24] The practical reason is evident from the above discussion: multilateral policymaking processes are difficult to track, the analysis needs to incorporate not only multilateral interaction but also domestic policies of interest and policy formulation, the information needed to draw reasonable conclusions (or even to undertake process tracking) is difficult to obtain, the negotiating forums are usually closed, and the key participants are far-flung. Tangible outcomes (through national or regional implementation or the establishment of multilateral instruments or mechanisms) that reflect the impact of norm development may follow only after years or decades of effort. Compared to

research on policy formulation in a national context, the obstacles are formidable.

The conceptual problems facing international relations researchers are perhaps even greater. Rationalist approaches to international relations that focus on bargaining outcomes in a framework within which interests are given are ill suited to the study of issue areas in which interests are indeterminate, negotiable, or constructed at both the domestic and multilateral level. Almost by definition, issues of “global public policy” such as environmental protection, human rights, or human security are ones in which the principle actors have to redefine or articulate their interests before concrete measures are undertaken. An over-reliance on state-centric approaches in both rationalist and constructivist scholarship (including “international society” approaches that focus on the development of shared norms and ideas among states) also means that scholars have difficulty grasping the complex and genuinely social nature of the transnational associational life that manifests itself at all levels of world politics, from the most local and grassroots to the most global. Developing and refining appropriate tools and methods with which to study these sociological dimensions of international life ought to be a priority for international relations scholarship.

Notes

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This document, and others cited in this review, are available at <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/source%5fdocuments/Final%20Report.pdf>. This review also draws on material forthcoming in the 2002 edition of *Small Arms Survey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). I was an expert member of the Swiss delegation to the UN conference and participated in the Preparatory Committee and other activities leading up to the conference. The views presented in this article are mine alone.

Report of the UN Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms, A/52/298, 27 August 1997.

These were the main lacunae identified by the major NGO groups, including the Biting the Bullet project (London), the Small Arms Working Group (Washington), and the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA).

See, for example, Kathryn Sikkink and Margaret Keck, *Activists Beyond Borders* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Thomas Risse, Stephen Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink, eds., *The Power of Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Miranda A. Schreurs and Elizabeth Economy, eds., *The Internationalization of Environmental Protection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Informal consultations with NGOs were held in Brussels at the conference “Sustainable Disarmament for Sustainable Development” in October 1998. Wider government-to-government consultations took place throughout that year.

For those interested in tracing this, the Small Arms Survey project has a comprehensive online searchable and full-text database of more than a thousand documents and statements from participating states in the UN conference process, plus the various drafts of the “Programme of Action” for comparison. See <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org>

For an overview of this debate, see Thomas Risse, “Let’s Argue!’ Communicative Action in World Politics,” *International Organization* 54, no.1 (winter 2000): 1–39; Ted Hopf, “The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory,” *International Security* 23, no. 1 (summer 1998): 171–200.

A similar process in Latin America resulted in the Brasilia Declaration, and although less transparent, it was clear that the Arab League had a coordinated position that was developed in extensive consultations. Human Rights Watch, *Rearming with Impunity: International Support for the Perpetrators of the Rwandan Genocide*, May 1995; reports of the International Commission of Inquiry (Rwanda), Security Council documents S/1996/67, S/1996/195, S/1997/1010, S/1998/63, S/1998/1096; Final Report of the UN Panel of Experts on Violations of Security Council Sanctions Against Unita (the “Fowler Report”), S/2000/203, 10 March 2000.

“Bamako Declaration on an African Common Position on the Illicit Proliferation, Circulation and Trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons,” Ministerial Conference on the Illicit Proliferation, Circulation and Trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons, Bamako, Mali, 30 November–1 December 2000.

Council of the European Union, European Union Programme for Preventing and Combating Illicit Trafficking in Conventional Arms, 26 June 1997; Council of the European Union, European Union Code of Conduct on Arms Exports, 8 June 1998; Council of the European Union, Joint Action of 17 December 1998 Adopted by the Council on the Basis of Article J.3 of the Treaty of the European Union on the European Union's Contribution to Combating the Destabilising Accumulation and Spread of Small Arms and Light Weapons, 1999/34/CFSP.17.

For a brief summary of EU efforts, see *Small Arms Survey 2001: Profiling the Problem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 268–272. The EU position in negotiations is summarized in A/CONF.192/PC/32, “Note Verbale Dated 2 March 2001 from the Permanent Mission of Sweden to the United Nations Addressed to the Department for Disarmament Affairs of the Secretariat, Transmitting the Comments of the European Union on the Chairman's Revised Draft Programme of Action on Small Arms (A/CONF.192/PC/L.4/Rev.1).”

Stefano Guzzini, “Structural Power: The Limits of Neorealist Power Analysis,” *International Organization* 47, no. 3 (summer 1993): 443–478.

Other cases where NGOs' domestic influence appeared important include Britain, Kenya, Norway, and (as will be noted below) the United States.

From the IANSA press release, “Opportunity Squandered to Introduce Tougher Arms Controls,” 21 July 2001. IANSA's two written responses to drafts of the “Programme of Action” can be found at <http://www.iansa.org/calendar/2001UN/documents/iansa/index.htm>.

Two major international NGO meetings have been held in Nairobi, various NGO projects focus on East Africa, and the Kenyan government has taken the lead in promoting the Nairobi Declaration, an action plan for East Africa and the Great Lakes region. For the Kenyan position, see “Statement by Hon. Major (Rtd.) Marsden H. Madoka, EGH, MP, Minister of State in the Office of the President of the Republic of Kenya, 11 July 2001.”

Not surprisingly, however, the evolution of the position of these states coincided with the advent of social democratic governments, which were in general more open to input from the NGOs active in the small arms field.

The publication of a report by Human Rights Watch denouncing (and documenting) Bulgaria's lax export control practices was hotly contested by the Bulgarian government at the time. Subsequently, however, policy tightened. Of course, a desire to move closer to NATO and the EU, and the election of a government more attuned to these concerns, also played a role, but the NGO was one of the first to shine the spotlight on Bulgaria, in the absence of which the need to change might not have been apparent. See Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It,” *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (spring 1992): 391–425; Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Jutta Weldes, *Constructing the National Interest* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

For a nice analysis, see Béatrice Pouligny, “NGOs as Transnational Forces? Beyond the Myth, Evolving Interactions Which Question the Political,” paper presented at the workshop “Resilience or Erosion? The State Under Attack — From Above and from Below,” CERI, Paris, 15–16 June 2000; online at <http://www.ceri-sciencespo.com/cerifr/cherlist/pouligny.htm>.

From the invitation letter to the meeting, which included thirty-eight NGO participants, more or less equally divided between North and South. As one participant put it, “We were told to lock ourselves in a room for a few days and come out with a campaign document.”

In addition to the works cited in note 5, key works include Richard Price, “Reversing the Gun Sights: Transnational Civil Society Targets Land Mines,” *International Organization* 52, no. 3 (summer 1998): 613–644; Ann Florini, ed., *The Third Force: The Rise of Transnational Civil Society* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000); Jackie Smith, Charles Chatfield, and Ron Pagnucco, eds., *Transnational Social Movements and Global Politics: Solidarity Beyond the State* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997); Peter Haas, ed., *Knowledge, Power and International Policy Coordination* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997). On small arms see Keith Krause, “Norm-Building in Security Spaces: The Emergence of the Light Weapons Problematic,” paper presented at the International Studies Association annual conference, Washington, D.C., 17–20 February 1999; Suzette Grillot, “Small Arms, Big Problems: IANSA and the Making of a Transnational Advocacy Network,” paper presented at the International Studies Association annual conference, Chicago, 20–24 February 2001.

See Wolfgang Reinicke, *Global Public Policy: Governing Without Government?* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1998).

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