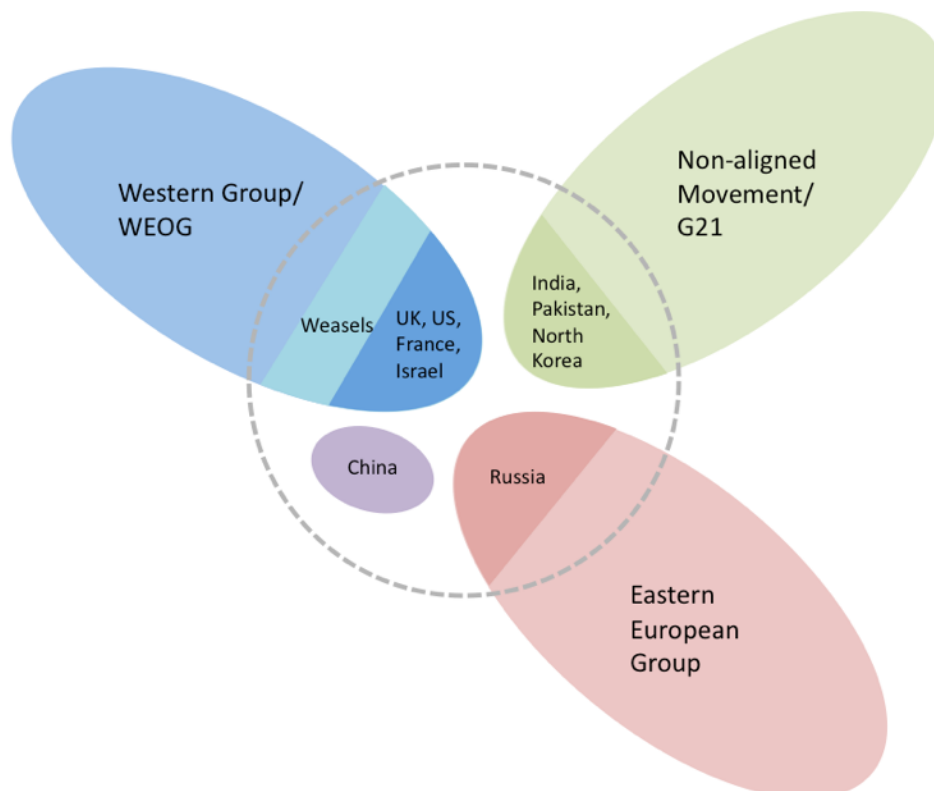


Obstacles to nuclear disarmament - and how to overcome them

3. The group system, or “divide and fool”

In disarmament as in other areas of multilateral endeavour, the participating states are divided into groups - often called “regional”, although “geopolitical” might be a better term. In the various disarmament settings the groups have different names and slightly varying membership, but there are generally three: a group of developed Western countries (Western Group, WEOG), a group of developing countries (NAM, G21), and a group of former Soviet-bloc countries (Eastern European Group). In settings such as the Conference on Disarmament, the NPT and the First Committee of the UN General Assembly, these groups typically negotiate and settle their positions and strategies internally, before sallying forth to do multilateral battle with the other groups.

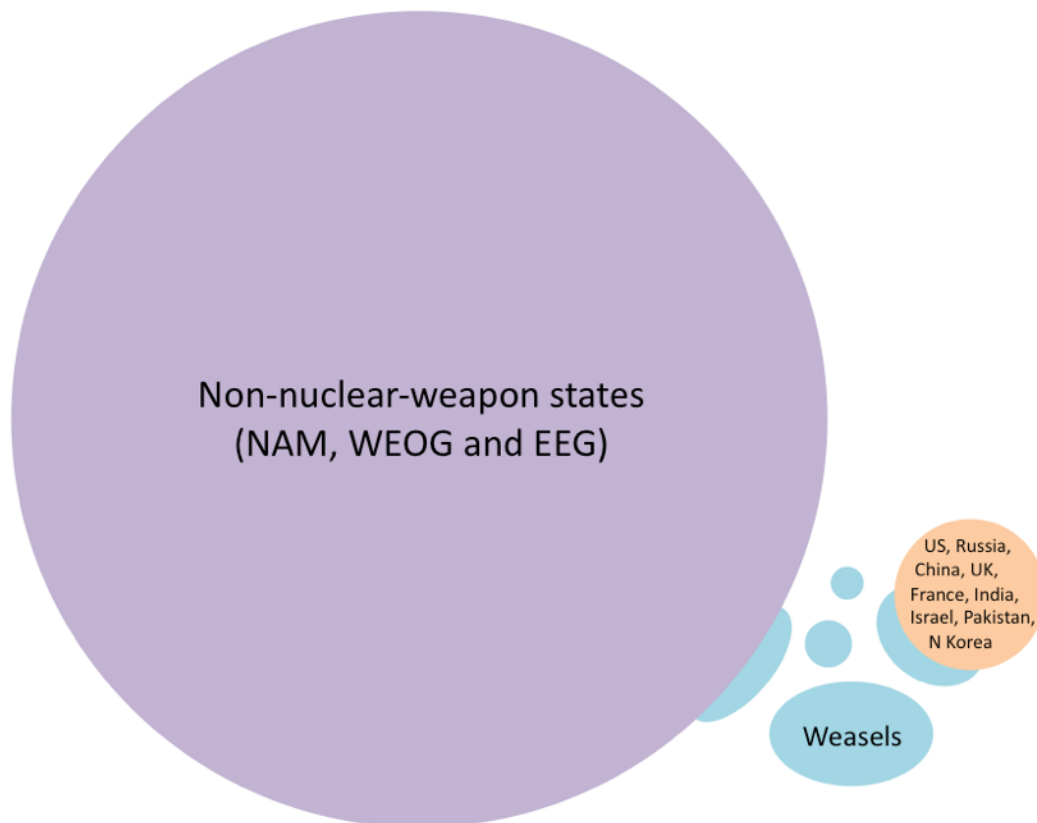
Crucially, each of these groups includes nuclear-armed members (and WEOG also includes a significant number of weasels). Each group must therefore come to a position that accommodates the interests of these members, before engaging in the wider forum. This means that group positions on nuclear disarmament are, in effect, “pre-compromised” and that *the collective influence of non-nuclear-weapon states is greatly diminished*. It is perhaps easier to see in the diagram below: the nuclear-armed states form a self-interested core, while the group system keeps the non-nuclear-weapon states separate, preventing them from uniting to advance their common interest.



One consequence of this is that the nuclear disarmament debate among states is conducted mostly in private, within each group. The public debate consists only of a ritualistic exchange of pre-compromised positions that are necessarily both vague and cumbersome. Is it any wonder that progress seems impossible?

Wildfire>_ is of course not the first to notice the obstacle posed by the group system, and there have been efforts to overcome it. The most notable is the New Agenda Coalition (NAC), which has had some modest success as a cross-group voice for disarmament. But the NAC has not been able to move beyond its own membership and break down the group barriers more generally. (The NPDI is often proclaimed as a cross-group “bridge-building” effort, but as a glance at the diagram above will show, it is actually a disingenuous attempt to expand the influence of the weasels by developing a weasel-like constituency in the NAM to put the brake on any serious disarmament moves.)

The great achievement of the initiative to examine the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons has been to circumvent the group system, bringing together all states which are concerned about the impact of nuclear weapons. A treaty banning nuclear weapons would have an even more potent effect, rearranging the system as shown in the diagram below, allowing the non-nuclear-weapon states to wield their full influence, splitting the weasels, and isolating the nuclear-armed states. This is what we mean by “changing the game”.



There is scope to begin doing this even within the NPT. There is no reason, for example, that the 155 states which joined the humanitarian impact statement at First Committee in 2014, could not start meeting as an informal “humanitarian caucus” during the review conference. Such a caucus would not need to develop text or take positions, but simply review and discuss the progress of the conference from a perspective of those genuinely committed to the total elimination of nuclear weapons.