

Strained missions: The diplomatic dilemmas of small states from the Global South in the area of autonomous weapons systems

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ABSTRACT: Emerging technologies around autonomous weapons systems pose significant threats, particularly to small states in the Global South. Despite these threats, many such small states have struggled to participate in multilateral discussions to regulate and prohibit autonomous weapons systems, while the negotiations have been ongoing within the Group of Governmental Experts on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (GGE on LAWS) under the United Nations Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (UNCCW) since 2017. This paper analyses the dilemmic positions small state diplomats find themselves in when trying to devote time and expertise to international discussions on autonomous weapons systems while at the same time negotiating the power politics within the international law-making system and working with a limited expertise pool and resource base. The research is based on interviews with diplomats in Geneva, participation data collated by the UN, and virtual and in-person observation of the GGE on LAWS discussions in the UNCCW. The paper concludes that disarmament diplomats from small states from the Global South face various challenges, including small governments back home that cannot address emerging issues, great power politics, unequal international legal systems, and absent common positions on disarmament. Nevertheless, these same small states have dealt with such challenges, so as to decolonise the asymmetric diplomatic space within which they operate.

Keywords: small states, autonomous weapons systems, international law, diplomacy, disarmament

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Introduction

In the contemporary international system, threats to international peace and security have increased significantly. The twenty-first century has been defined by advances in technology, particularly ‘disruptive’ emerging technologies. These advances have significantly altered warfare, international relations, and the security landscape for small states. The advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI), Machine Learning techniques, and other emerging technologies has changed the nature of global military competition and the international security architecture.

The United Nations (UN) system and international law in general have offered small states an opportunity to gain prominence and clout in the international system, providing ways to safeguard their interests and security (Keohane, 1969). Emerging technologies, however, have brought with them new security challenges and have changed international ‘power equations’ (Gill, 2019). Non-alignment alone, praised by Keohane as a key diplomatic innovation for small states, may no longer work as the human costs of war have fallen for rich, highly militarised states and the ‘war on terror’ has brought remote killing directly into the territories of small states in the Global South. AI has transformed international security, intelligence, foreign policy, and international governance, with changes and an increase in practices and actors involved in AI governance discourse (Fischer & Wenger, 2021). It is

therefore essential to understand how small-state diplomacy has evolved in the international system and how actors from small states deal with new challenges in international security diplomacy within this transformed context.

The international relations scholarship on algorithmic warfare has been largely neo-realist and has focused mainly on issues related to strategic stability and great power politics as well as ethics-oriented research on the humanitarian and ethical concerns raised by AI developments in the military, particularly autonomous weapons systems (Fischer & Wenger, 2021). Yet, little has been done to analyse and understand the politics of small state security and diplomacy in the study of algorithmic warfare. The conceptual frameworks that dominate studies on algorithmic warfare have so far not touched much on the perspectives and plight of small states (Bode et al., 2024). This paper offers an empirical analysis of small state diplomacy in the governance of autonomous weapons systems, providing a critique of the current systemic structural constitution of the global governance system in disarmament. The paper focuses on a group of small states from the Global South that have been active in the discussions on autonomous weapons systems at the United Nations Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (UNCCW) who face unique challenges in their diplomacy in the ongoing multilateral discussions.

Small states are a key feature of the international system: the majority of states are small anyway (Long, 2022; Neumann, 2004). It is therefore important to understand international politics and relations from the perspective of small states that face heightened threats and stakes in the face of a rapidly changing international security landscape. A postcolonial lens is useful in unpacking how unequal systems and practices of worldmaking that are historically rooted have shaped and continue to shape small states' experiences with and interactions in the global governance of emerging challenges. In this paper, I address the question: *what are the challenges faced by diplomats from small states in the Global South in the discussions on the global governance of autonomous weapons systems, and how do they navigate these challenges?* Literature in small state studies has shown that small states face various challenges in their diplomacy, particularly at the UN level, with challenges ranging from structural and capacity barriers, diversity in interests, asymmetric access to information (Súilleabháin, 2014), opposition from powerful states (Jones et al., 2010), restricted resources, and limited political weight (Alley, 2020). Within the field of autonomous weapons systems discussions, small states – particularly from the Global South – face unique challenges as they grapple with a new reality of algorithmic warfare, a challenge that is likely to affect them disproportionately as seen in the use of AI in Gaza by Israel (Karner, 2024). Despite these challenges, between 2017 and 2024, small states from the Global South managed to evolve discussions on autonomous weapons systems to address their concerns, including issues relating to algorithmic bias (Bhila, 2024) and other specific risks that would relate to them. As the problem of autonomous weapons systems has only gained centrality at the UN in recent years, this paper addresses an important gap in autonomous weapons systems literature, with small state perspectives having been neglected in the study of the ongoing discussions (Bode et al., 2024).

This paper is a multidisciplinary effort aimed at providing insights into small-state diplomacy in contemporary international security developments from a postcolonial perspective. In the paper, I submit that it is essential to understand and conceptualise small-state diplomacy in international security as new developments in the international system threaten their security more than it does middle and great powers. The paper offers insights into small-state diplomacy on autonomous weapons systems, focusing on the workings of the UNCCW and how small states have strategized and innovated in their diplomacy when faced with multiple challenges. Following a review of several International Relations studies of

international institutions, I focus my analysis mainly on the role played by technocratic expertise and its challenges in engaging and grappling with an everchanging international security and international law environment. Faced with limited power and diplomatic options, small state experts find themselves in a difficult position in international law, prompting them to employ several strategies, which this paper seeks to unpack.

The paper starts by outlining the theoretical and methodological choices and processes behind this research. After clarifying the use of the term ‘small states’, the paper moves on to discuss the implications of autonomy in weapons and emerging military technologies on small states, arguing that these developments present them with more unique challenges than they do for middle and great powers. This should oblige small states to dedicate increased resources and attention to diplomatic efforts in pushing for the development of new international law to govern these weapons; but it is precisely this resource bottleneck that most small states face. The paper also offers some context to ongoing discussions on autonomous weapons systems in the CCW since 2014, with a specific emphasis on small states and their diplomats. I then present the challenges faced and strategies employed by small state diplomats in the discussions on autonomous weapons systems. The paper concludes with suggestions and implications for theory and practice.

Defining small states

Several considerations are made in this paper to understand what a small state is. I treat these considerations as a collective unit rather than standalone definitions. The first consideration is vulnerability or weakness, both to military and human security threats (Baldacchino & Wivel, 2020). Secondly, a small state has limited foreign policy and diplomatic resources and options at its disposal (Panke, 2017). Thirdly, the military power of small states is limited, hence their ability to ensure their borders against big states is also limited. This aspect is especially important when discussing disarmament diplomacy as the security of these small states rests mainly on international law instead of defensive capability. The fourth consideration is economic power. Economic power is key to a state’s size as it determines its ability to produce or purchase weapons, for example (Vandenbosch, 1964). Thus, a small state can be understood based on vulnerability/weakness, military capability, foreign policy options, economic/industrial power, and ability to effectively manage internal politics. Most states from the Global South classified here fit most, if not all, the above metrics. This definition takes a pragmatic and relative approach suggested by Guilfoyle (2023) that considers relational power as the main characteristic of a small state. These states are defined as small using the above measures *in comparison to* ‘major’ or ‘big’ (and including nuclear) powers (Doxey, 1972) and middle powers (Aydin, 2021; Aydın-Düzgit, 2023; Efstathopoulos, 2021; Jordaan, 2003; Özkan, 2006). This criterion is essential when discussing international security and diplomacy as the relational imperative has a direct influence on state behaviour.

Small states are protected by the international laws of sovereignty and are recognised under the Montevideo Convention (Long, 2022) but they face several challenges in international law (Ba, 2023). Diplomats from small states play balancing acts and know that they face an uphill task in navigating international institutions as they attempt to further their countries’ interests. Small states grapple with ‘living with little’ and protecting themselves from bigger states (Tommy Koh & Li Lin Chang, 2005), sometimes living with the knowledge that aggressive bigger powers can threaten them with little consequence when they find it “easier to defeat than to woo” (Fox, 1969, p. 755). Literature affirms that small states face various challenges in their diplomacy, particularly at the UN level, ranging from structural and capacity barriers, diversity in interests, asymmetric access to information (Súilleabháin, 2014),

opposition from powerful states (Jones et al., 2010), restricted resources, and limited political weight (Alley, 2020). As the international community has become increasingly interconnected, the role of diplomacy in promoting the interests of small countries has become even more crucial (Langhorne, 2009).

Yet, small states face multiple challenges in furthering these interests. Lacking military and economic means necessary to influence global policy, small states' main goals are primarily towards survival and wellbeing (Thorhallsson & Bailes, 2016), which means that they are unlikely to push forward distinct policies to influence the international system. In the same manner, the limited network of diplomats possessed by small states abroad makes them liable to the 'capture' of their foreign policy by scrupulous actors (Thorhallsson & Bailes, 2016). One key challenge facing small states is the disparity in administrative and financial resources compared to their larger counterparts (Panke, 2012). With limited personnel and budgets, small state delegations often struggle to cover the full breadth of the negotiation agenda, hindering their ability to develop detailed positions and effective negotiation strategies. This, in turn, can undermine their capacity to influence the outcomes of crucial international negotiations. With the advent of a new international environment that has ushered in new topics and crises requiring new approaches and tools, small states have found themselves in need of increased expertise, most of which lie within the remit of new non-governmental players like civil society, academia, private companies, and individuals (Jazbec, 2010). In addition, small states lack resources to gather data, analyse information, develop positions, and defend these positions (Dookeran & Mohan, 2019), especially concerning emerging issues in global governance.

The field of disarmament multilateralism favours the 'West' while marginalising the 'Rest' (Mathur, 2014). It is this 'Rest' I am most interested in. I focus on small states from the Global South that are (1) less militarised as compared to their Western counterparts, (2) not protected by regional military alliances like the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), (3) economically vulnerable, (4) historically marginalised in the international system, (5) with limited capability to influence foreign policy, and (6) are fragile in their internal politics. Note that the size and population of a state are, for the conceptualisations here, problematic, and not very useful in analysing international law-making patterns in the disarmament sphere. Having listed these six parameters, the small states included here do not necessarily fit into all six; but all of them fit into at least three. It is within this context that the definitions of small states given above should be understood.

The United Nations' role on Global South disarmament diplomacy

Despite the hope of equality and security presented by these forums, the international diplomacy arena is still fraught with challenges for Global South states. The UN was created at a time when colonialism was still at its height. However, with their imminent independence, new small states from the Global South were presented with an opportunity to, at least in theory, be equals among the community of nations. Such states were hopeful of the security and equality that international law and multilateralism could provide (Ba, 2023). In disarmament diplomacy, the UN forums – such as the Conference of Disarmament (CD), the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW), the General Assembly First Committee, and several instruments like the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) and the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) – provide a space for technical discussions on existing and emerging weapons.

All Western states (except Andorra) are High Contracting Parties to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) while 63 Global South states are not signatories to it. The convention is a key instrument in disarmament diplomacy and international humanitarian law in general, and the language it carries notes that it is essential for all states to be part of it, “especially the *militarily significant* states” (UNODA, 1983). The convention is viewed as an instrument in international law that aims at balancing humanitarian concerns with military necessity (Carvin, 2017), making the military imperative an important measure of state size and in the significance of contributions to the subsequent international law-making.

Although the Global South has participated in weapons control forums (Bode, 2019; Plesch, 2016), challenges to this participation persist. One of the key issues that has been raised in the discussions on autonomous weapons systems is on which forum would be the best, especially pertaining to the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion (Chengeta, 2022) and the speed of the discussions. The dynamics of international law-making differ starkly in relation to the voting system and the deliberative model (Kaufmann, 1996). The voting system associated with the UN General Assembly processes, does not cost much to small states but is more on the political level than it is technical¹. In the voting system, states commit to vote for or against something that they have not contributed to; or to abstain when they do not have, or do not wish to have, a position on an issue. In the consensus-based system, however, states must unpack and understand issues at a substantive level before developing an international law. Through this system, norms and customary international law are developed, and the efficacy of such outcomes is more effective. The discussions on autonomous weapons systems have been ongoing within this later consensus-based system. This, however, has its problems for small states who must stretch themselves to commit to discussing at a technical level while safeguarding their national interests. The majority of states in the UN system have called for a legally binding instrument; therefore, for most states, the diplomatic discussions surrounding autonomous weapons systems are geared towards the development of new international law. However, for highly militarised states, the discussions are about interpreting existing international law and developing non-binding principles and ethical guidelines. With the UN providing the space for discussions on autonomous weapons systems, the paper provides a critique of how in/exclusive the space is and how those structurally marginalised innovate to transform those spaces and get their voices heard.

Autonomous weapons systems and small states

The study of autonomous weapons systems is relatively new, moving in step with the revolutionary developments in robotics and artificial intelligence (AI). Autonomous weapons systems are broadly defined as “systems that, upon activation by a human user(s), use the processing of sensor data to select and engage a target(s) with force without human intervention” (State of Palestine, 2023). For this paper, this autonomy does not necessarily mean ‘full’ autonomy, as decision-making systems in war, automated human-operated systems, and other systems based on algorithms and sensors, also affect the security of small states and the rights and dignity of their people.

Autonomous weapons systems are likely to affect small states in the Global South more than they affect highly militarised powers, especially because they lack defensive systems to detect and defend against these weapons. There is vast evidence that shows that AI systems may perpetuate and amplify existing social inequalities, with autonomous weapons systems likely to have the same challenges and affect marginalised groups in the Global South, those with disabilities (Figueroa et al., 2023) and women (Chandler, 2021). The possible biases of

¹ Interview response, 16 October 2023.

AI systems, surveillance, and other emerging (including military) technologies against populations or communities of colour are well documented (Ams, 2023; Jones, 2021). Autonomous weapons systems are likely to carry the same societal biases programmed into them, and the global governance discourse on autonomous weapons systems has so far peripheralized the issue of algorithmic bias which is central to Global South and small state imaginaries of and concerns about autonomy in weapons (Bhila, 2024). Moreover, research shows that small states with ongoing armed conflict, political instability, and problems of terrorism in Asia and Africa are likely to be more affected by autonomous weapons systems (Austero et al., 2020). In addition, autonomous drones and other emerging technologies are being used in counterterrorism exercises by Russia, China, the US, France, and others in Africa, Asia, and other parts of the Global South, with recorded cases of testing new technologies in these operations due to strategic competition (Biegon & Watts, 2021; Rajosefa, 2023). The first recorded use of an autonomous weapon system is believed to have been in Libya in 2020 (Ferl, 2024). Small states, and particularly those in Africa, are arguably more vulnerable to internal conflicts, terrorism, insurgencies, illicit arms trade, and political instability, making it possible for autonomous weapons systems to find their way into these states. In most of their proposals to the CCW GGE on LAWS, small states have voiced their concerns about the proliferation and non-state actor use potential (e.g., G10 Proposal, 2022). It is therefore essential for small states to be involved in the making of the international law that will govern these weapons.

A postcolonial perspective on global governance

This paper offers a postcolonial analysis of global politics essential for understanding disarmament diplomacy and politics. It draws upon insights from a postcolonial framework to make sense of what Global South diplomats experience and how they navigate the highly unequal multilateral system in the governance of emerging technologies of war. A postcolonial perspective and critique “entails outlining contours of the counter-hegemonic reworlding from the Global South” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2023, p. 2). Postcolonial thought pushes back against narratives and practices that aim to silence and marginalise difference, challenging exclusionary practices inherent in global governance processes (Otto, 1996). Within a system of continued coloniality, discrimination, and exclusion (Mathur, 2014), small state diplomats from the Global South find themselves in positions where they must develop and push forward new approaches to weapons regulations and prohibitions despite the seemingly insurmountable challenges they face. In addition, the postcolonial framework allows an acknowledgement of how the pervasive conflicts within the Global South undermine their diplomatic moral arguments (Plesch, 2016) despite the integral role of disarmament in the prospects for peace and security for those states. This paper is an attempt to think ‘with’, ‘from’, and ‘in’ the Global South (Anderson, 2017; Dumoulin Kervran et al., 2018) in order to not only show the challenges of the current disarmament practices but also to confront the current discourses that have peripheralized the ‘other’ in global governance narratives, particularly in the area of emerging military technology governance. It adds to postcolonial thought by moving beyond historical analysis of inequality to providing policy-relevant arguments for decolonised multilateral processes for engaging with emerging problems in the area of disarmament.

Methodology

This paper is an outcome of research on the dynamics of small-state participation in the multilateral discussions on autonomous weapons systems. The research utilises qualitative methodology to gain in-depth insights into the workings of international law diplomacy at the UN level. Ten interviews were carried out between May and December 2023 with diplomats from various small states in the Global South whose mission offices are in Geneva. The

interviews followed the ethical rules of anonymity and confidentiality, which prevents me from naming the states whose views and perceptions I used for this research. However, the data presented and analysed here represents views from ten small sovereign states in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. These states are small based on most measures of vulnerability, limited impact in projecting their foreign policy, military power, internal political capacity, and economic capacity, in comparison with middle powers and great powers. Of these states, two were from Latin America, with populations of less than 10 million people, and with no military influence in the region. These Latin American states have been involved in the discussions on autonomous weapons systems since 2013. Four states were from Africa, with a cut-off population of 15 million, and with one of them experiencing conflict. Three states were from Asia (with a population reaching up to 45 million), with two of them having been involved in the discussions for a long time, and one having joined the discussions much later. These were experiencing security threats but with minimal conflict recorded. Lastly, one interview was with a state from the Middle East that has experienced conflict for several years and has a vested interest in the regulation of autonomous weapons systems. These ten states had only one diplomat each in Geneva dealing with disarmament issues, whom I interviewed.

The analysis for this paper also relied on in-person and virtual observation (event ethnography) of the Group of Governmental Experts on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (GGE on LAWS) meetings that have taken place in Geneva since 2017. My observations started in 2022, although I also reviewed recordings of the discussions since 2017. The meetings have taken place on these dates: 13-17 November 2017; 9-13 April and 27-31 August 2018; 25-29 March and 20-21 August 2019; 21-25 September and 2-6 November 2020; 3-13 August, 24 September-1 October, and 2-8 December 2021; 7-11 March and 25-29 July 2022; 6-10 March and 15-19 May 2023; and 4-8 March 2024.² These observations looked out for trends in participation, content, lengths of statements by states, and barriers to participation for small states. Observations were recorded through field notes, and public recordings of the sessions (UN Digital Records Portal, 2024) were revisited for rechecking of the data. This data was collated with the data from the ten interviews, and then coded and analysed using the NVivo qualitative research software to establish themes.

Diplomatic challenges for small states from the Global South in international disarmament diplomacy on autonomous weapons systems

This section presents the observations and discussions/interviews carried out with Global South diplomats concerning the diplomatic challenges they face in the discussions on autonomous weapons systems at the UN. Although these challenges have been discussed elsewhere by small-state studies scholars (Jazbec, 2010; Panke, 2011, 2012), this section (and paper) engages with the diplomatic challenges and agency of Global South diplomats, projecting a voice of a peripheralized category. Coupled with the fact that autonomous weapons systems are a relatively new category of emerging technologies with which Global South small state diplomats must engage, the diplomatic challenges they face are highly structural and historical. These challenges range from administrative, geopolitical, policy-related and economic, to expertise-related issues. This section highlights a few of these challenges, before illustrating how diplomats from small states have dealt with these.

'Operating in a vacuum': National-international coordination dilemmas

The interviews conducted with diplomats in Geneva revealed that, in disarmament diplomacy, many small states take time to develop a position. On security issues, small states

² See <https://dig.watch/processes/gge-laws>

do not have the luxury of those quick decisions because they must look at the competing interests of big powers. It is only those small states that have committed themselves to a long-term principle-based approach to international law that can quickly develop a position when the need arises. In one GGE on LAWS session, I approached a small state diplomat to ask what their take on the discussions was and their response was, “we have our thoughts on the topic, but we are waiting to see what our partners think about the issue,” meaning that they could not develop a position until China and Russia had clarified at a political level whether they were in support of or against a legally binding instrument. In my interviews with diplomats, three specific issues came up: (1) having no national framework on emerging issues to fall back on when making decisions on and while participating; (2) foreign policy prioritisation due to limited capacity and resources; and (3) strategic alignment with highly militarised states. I briefly unpack these here.

Firstly, most small states from the Global South do not have policies on emerging technologies. The European Union, the USA, the UK, China, France, and other developed countries have AI policies and Department of Defence (DoD) directives that inform their positions at the international law-making level. For the Global South diplomat, decisions must be made based on immediate strategic utility rather than longstanding policy goals. However, this is not to say that all small states from the Global South operate within this policy ‘vacuum.’ Certain small states – such as Costa Rica, Singapore, Malta and Fiji – owe their existence to international law; hence they have longstanding principles that guide their conduct in international law-making. The most active Global South states in the discussions on autonomous weapons systems have a longstanding image in the international law sphere to preserve. For example, Costa Rica is very active in disarmament discussions precisely because it is international law that provides its security as it does not have an army. So, in the autonomous weapons systems discussions space, states with no standing armies like Costa Rica, Panama, and the Holy See are all actively involved in calling for strong measures to regulate autonomous weapons systems. In other forums like the law of the sea, principles in the archipelagic doctrine were pushed for by small states who had vested interests and virtually reversed the Eurocentric Grotian *mare liberum* doctrine (Munavvar, 2021). These small states have retained a long-term interest in these issues and have developed global images, as seen in Malta’s relationship with the international law of the sea that it is directly concerned with (Panke & Gurol, 2018). In the fields of AI and autonomous weapons systems, however, most small states from the Global South struggle with empty policy spaces that hobble their ability to inform foreign policy decisions in international law-making spaces.

In that same vein, because of the lack of policies that cater to emerging issues in global security in small states in the Global South, diplomats also lack the required technical support from their capitals, particularly with issues on emerging technologies. One diplomat noted:

We don’t have the same level of support at the technical level. We don’t have the luxury of having with us eight experts with the delegation when we are having discussions. Many of our capitals are 14 or 12 hours on a plane from Geneva. There is no such luxury to even send in one expert, let alone talking about eight.

This means that, when coordinating with the capital, one firstly must become a subject matter expert and must communicate clearly and convince the capital that the topic is worth pursuing. Although delegations differ in their functioning and levels of autonomy, normally every decision must pass through the capital, and discussions in international law can shift in dramatic ways, prompting the need to make decisions quite quickly. For highly militarised states like Russia and the US, blocking a report or blocking progress in a certain issue does not come with political costs and gives them time to make decisions while no regulations are in

place. For small states, however, making a quick decision without the capital's blessing is suicidal. A case of this happened with an African diplomat in New York who pushed for issues to do with gender inequality in disarmament only to be called by the capital with a strong warning that they were introducing concepts that were not discussed. This of course is related to the problem of strategic alignment; but it shows how technical expertise alone is not enough in the absence of established policies in the internal framework of a state.

Secondly, because small states have small capacities and limited resources, they must prioritise which foreign policy goals to pursue and which to ignore. As already shown, issues of autonomous weapons systems end up falling down the list of priorities for states as they try to manage their limited resources. This dilemma is manifest in the following quote from a diplomat interviewed for this research:

the problem with multilateralism is that the capacity to engage is very limited on the part of the developing countries, so they choose which issues to engage in. So, a country like Barbados, for example, would only engage on climate change issues, but they would not appear on the others. But, on climate change issues, they're very strong, and they can influence the negotiations.

In the autonomous weapons systems discussions, Singapore at first did not see merit in joining the discussions. But after having attended GGE on LAWS sessions as observers, they set about becoming a High Contracting Party to the CCW in 2023, possibly in consideration of their industrial capabilities in AI.³ Many small states have small bureaucracies that cannot tackle all the issues in international law. At each session in the First Committee in New York at the UN, for example, some 70 resolutions are tabled for states to consider (UN Press, 2023). This means that small states end up prioritising which topics to focus on; while bigger states can commit expertise across the board.

Concerning autonomous weapons systems, most small states from the Global South believe that this is not an issue directly related to them at the moment. One respondent noted:

whilst we are concerned about security in general, our focus when discussing disarmament issues is on nuclear disarmament, so for us to even think about autonomous weapons, it's far-fetched.

For small state diplomats from the Global South, the priority is on 'bread and butter' issues, a phrase that occurred in three separate interviews for this research. As states grapple with such issues as terrorism, insurgencies, debt, and underdevelopment, they tend to direct their foreign policy towards these immediate issues, sacrificing international law-making in other areas that will still have an impact on their security in the long run.

Thirdly, for some small states, their security is directly linked to one or more of the highly militarised states. Strategic alignment and hedging for small states in the Global South are not new phenomena (Marston, 2024). Although in forums like the CCW, expertise is more valuable than alignment as compared to voting-based forums, small states still come under massive pressure to align with certain states in exchange for support in other areas. In some interviews, it was revealed that small developing states sometimes sacrifice raising some issues in the autonomous weapons systems discussions in exchange for support particularly in the forums on trade and development that have a direct impact on the economic challenges faced by small

³ This information is **not drawn** from an interview with a Singaporean diplomat. It is based on observation of trends of participation within the CCW (event ethnography carried out between 2022 and 2024).

states. Although this is strategic on the part of small states, it gives highly militarised states more influence over issues that ensure the perpetration of a hegemonic international system.

The problem of expertise

The histories and academic efforts in International Relations and International Law have reflected the Eurocentric tendencies of international diplomacy (Eijking, 2023). Diplomats from small states in the Global South have played a key role in international law-making and disarmament diplomacy over the past century despite facing many challenges, yet their work and agency have rarely been appreciated in academia (Plesch, 2016). Theories of technocratic diplomacy have created the image of expertise as a great power tool in strategy while making the small-state Global South diplomats invisible. In this section, I briefly highlight the problems of expertise faced by small states in the Global South, before outlining how a few capable diplomats navigate the challenges they face and how they build this expertise.

To influence discussions in international law-making, a state must invest in personnel qualified enough to contribute effectively. A state must “invest in having people that would study and be engaged in”⁴ a certain topic for them to make an impact. Discussions on autonomous weapons systems are highly technical and need both devotion and expertise. However, for small Global South states, “the people who will cover the GGE will always have to cover multiple other disarmament portfolios.”⁵ Whereas bigger states and rich European states can fund PhDs to study the subject matter and inform discussions, small state diplomats must study on their own and convince their respective line ministries of the importance of taking part in the discussions. Governments in the West, for example the UK, work closely with their universities to inform decisions on positions and contributions to international discussions. Meanwhile, as victims of an ever-acute brain drain, small states in the Global South may lack local experts focusing on those issues (Docquier et al., 2007). This could leave small state diplomats as the sole researchers on various topics.

And yet, several brilliant diplomats from small states in the Global South have emerged in the discussions on autonomous weapons systems despite the challenges they face. Diplomats from the Philippines, Panama, Costa Rica, Palestine, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Uruguay, and several others have created respectable reputations for themselves in the autonomous weapons and disarmament space for their technical depth. One diplomat had this to say:

there are many small state delegations who are able to match the quality of the discussion of the arguments from the bigger delegations, and they are taken seriously. One example I can think of is the United States and the State of Palestine. You can see them debating, and you can see them also, having informal bilateral meetings, and the US delegation is really taking Palestine very seriously because of the level of arguments that it brings to the table. The Palestinian delegation is composed of one woman who is able to, first of all, submit a very thoughtful working paper, and at the same time articulate very sophisticated arguments that the US and delegations of big powers think are worth engaging with.

Despite these diplomats having to deal with multiple topics in disarmament, they are usually commendable in their work and manage to inform discussions effectively. Still, not all small states from the Global South are lucky to have such effective diplomats.

⁴ Interview response, 25 September 2023.

⁵ Interview response, 16 October 2023.

Strained missions

The problem of small missions has already been glossed over in the previous sections, which means only a reinforcement of this point is needed here. Two basic issues emerge on this issue: small states from the Global South have small missions in Geneva, while some even lack missions there; and the dynamic of diplomatic rotation where the development of expertise on topics is always required. I unpack these issues here in brief.

With more and more issues in global security emerging, the strain on diplomatic missions in the UN, particularly in Geneva, cannot be understated. All the interviews for this research raised the issue of small delegations, especially measured against the amount of work to be done. For each GGE on LAWS session, one needs to prepare statements, analyse previous reports, look at each provision/point in other submissions, write working papers, and respond to others' submissions during the sessions. For diplomats from small states, sometimes this is just impossible as they would be dealing with more than one topic or meeting simultaneously. One diplomat from a small state narrated how they were asked by a delegate from "one of the producer countries" which paragraph of the GGE report they oversaw, assuming that all states delegate parts of the report to several experts to analyse.⁶ The small state diplomat had to read the whole report while several lawyers and technical experts from highly militarised states would read a part each. It is within this context that experts from small states in the Global South must compete.

Small state agency in autonomous weapons systems diplomacy

In academic corridors, the talk of 'Great Power competition' in the age of algorithms has taken centre stage, creating the image that only great powers can strategize in the age of AI. China, the USA, the EU, and Russia have entered into a new race for AI development and regulation (Bradford, 2023) and conferences have been held on the implications of emerging technologies on great power competition. All the while, small states have been largely treated as passive citizens in the international system, serving only to watch the big players compete against each other. In the CCW however, small states have not been passive recipients of great power resolve, despite the many challenges they face. Here, I focus on two ways in which small state diplomats have leveraged their positions: through the creation of knowledge-based technical groups and through aligning with experts from outside diplomatic/state circles.

In the 1960s, the concept of non-alignment was seen as a game-changing strategy in small-state international relations (Keohane, 1969). The non-alignment strategy was a result of a new calibre of states who thought distinctly from their Western colleagues and did not "have the same sense of what being a small power implies in terms of a range of acceptable behaviour" (Rothstein, 1966, p. 402). Whereas European small states sought alignment with one great power or another, the small states of the Global South did not conform to the boundaries resulting from great power competition. Instead of being incapacitated by the competing great powers, great power competition gave the non-aligned small states tools for strategizing and manoeuvring to their advantage.

Colonial history and the constitution of the global order have confined Global South states to the periphery of the international system (Ayodele, 2023). As a result, these states have cooperated in negotiating better positions for themselves, particularly in the UN system

⁶ Interview response, 15 December 2023.

(Ayodele, 2023). The African Group, the Arab Group, and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) are prime examples of these efforts. These groups have sought to advance marginalised states' interests at the international level. This research however moves the conceptualisation of small-state strategic international relations further than and from these geopolitical groupings. I contend that these groupings, within the international law-making arena, have become mere ideological spaces where political solidarity is pledged. These groups may have indeed served the political interests of small states effectively over the years; however, when it comes to the provision of security, these anti-colonial tools may have served their purpose, and have had little success in building new forms of knowledge.

To fill this gap, new forms of knowledge-based groups have emerged. Emerging discourses have sought to question exclusionary knowledge systems while contributing to and placing formerly marginalised knowledges at the centre. This kind of 'reworlding' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2023) requires not only resisting colonial and domineering kinds of knowledge but also a constructive contribution to world-making. It is within this context of new forms of world-making from the Global South that new technical groupings have emerged. In this section, I briefly describe the dynamic of 'ad hoc' technical small-state groupings in the international law-making arena to illustrate how small states innovate to achieve their interests.

As diplomats and experts from small states continued to see the weaknesses of regionalism, a few of them came together to defend and further develop common positions in the area of autonomous weapons systems. From 2017 to 2018, the NAM, the African Group, and others issued statements and sought to show that they were in support of the development of regulations on autonomous weapons systems. However, these groups are political and lack the technical expertise required to develop proposals for international law-making. For NAM and the African Group, the state that is chairing at that time develops the statement without "reinventing the wheel, they are just taking from what has been said before and just changing a few things to match the current situation."⁷ Secondly, these groups are big, making it hard to develop common positions, particularly with many states under NAM not agreeing on disarmament diplomacy. To this effect, one diplomat noted:

we might have a common position in certain areas but in disarmament, we don't. Until we come up with that consensus, we are not going anywhere.

Similarly, another diplomat from the NAM argued:

autonomous weapons systems are very far from our common interest, we may have other common interests, but autonomous weapons systems might not be one of those areas. Geopolitical groups are vital but not that helpful in international law-making because they help you less to understand the positions of others, which is important especially if you want to move into a certain direction. You need to know what, how, and where others want to go; what they are concerned about, and what is important to them.

This is where the importance of newer forms of semi-formal technical groups becomes more evident.

The Group of 15 (G15), as it is known at the time of writing (January 2024), originated as a realisation of common positions among small states from the Global South and their discontentment towards how progress in regulation was lagging behind technological developments relating to autonomous weapons systems. As a result, in 2020 Costa Rica, the Philippines, and Panama – three states that did not represent a single regional bloc – got

⁷ Interview response, 12 September 2023.

together to express common positions in working papers/proposals and GGE debate sessions. These states agreed that there was a need to create a legally binding instrument to regulate autonomous weapons systems considering the risks they pose to all of humanity, going beyond the common arguments of military necessity and international humanitarian law used by highly militarised states. The group grew to include Peru, El Salvador, and Uruguay and was backed by a collection of excellent diplomats who had in-depth knowledge of disarmament issues and autonomous weapons systems. As a result of this expertise, they were joined by Palestine, Ecuador, Sierra Leone, and Argentina, leading to the development of their first Working Paper in 2021 (Joint Working Paper, 2021). What was then the G10 crafted ‘elements of a normative framework’ that could include issues like human control, human-machine interaction, autonomy, and how the framework would have to consider international humanitarian law (IHL), international human rights law (IHRL) and international criminal law to address the gaps created by the introduction of new technologies in the military domain.

By 2024, the group had been further joined by Kazakhstan, Guatemala, Nigeria, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic to become the G15. Initially, some other states from the Global South – Brazil, and Mexico – had provided a perceived middle ground between the radical calls by civil society to ban autonomous weapons systems and the US and Russian pro-autonomous weapons systems positions. In the first instance, it is interesting to note that, in these ‘technical’ international law-making arenas on disarmament, practically all the permanent members (P5) of the UN Security Council are in unison. So, for example, Russia and the US supported each other in arguing that IHL fully applies to autonomous weapons systems which means there is no need to change anything; but civil society strongly disagreed and called for new laws to be put in place. The middle ground presented by Mexico, Chile, and Brazil was “very far from the aspiration of an actual protocol, veering towards a set of voluntary guidelines and voluntary measures,”⁸ leading one diplomat to speculate that maybe these states were also interested in developing, or were using, autonomous weapons systems of a defensive type.

When the G15 joined the discussion, the individual diplomats from each state supported each other and adopted a strong position that introduced several normative and practical aspects to the discussion. The discussion had been centred on whether IHL applied to autonomous weapons systems or not. The G15’s working papers brought more attention to issues of ethics rather than just IHL, arguing for the introduction of the concept of ‘meaningful human control’ to weapons law. The CCW was created to implement IHL but the development of weapons that may have agency of their own creates questions about the efficacy of IHL in that context. For small states, the basis for argumentation should be ethics, as ethics have historically informed the creation of international law. IHL is based on the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution, principles which might not be suitably addressed when discussing autonomous weapons systems (Woodcock, 2024). For small states within the G15, however, this should not be the premise for discussion; they argue that human control in warfare should be an intrinsic value, not determined or informed by whether there is distinction, proportionality, or precaution. The end goal is peace for the international community, not civilised violence.

These positions are just a few examples of how small states have become central to the discussions, obliging the highly militarised states to reconsider their positions in the GGE on LAWS. With the submission of what is termed ‘Draft Protocol VI’, the G15 obliged the big powers to start drafting their contributions as ‘Draft Articles’ leaning towards formal international legal standards rather than mere thought papers. One diplomat argued that the draft articles were “the American way of extending their hand,” with more evidence of

⁸ Interview response, 25 September 2023.

compromise seen in the outcome reports that included “a more ethical flavour.”⁹ The G15 group can no longer be ignored; and it has developed a reputation as a great source of expertise from the Global South.

Conclusion

The security implications of autonomous weapons systems for small states from the Global South are many and cannot be denied. Yet, there remain key structural challenges in international law processes that militate against their participation. On the diplomatic level, small states face several challenges, key of which is the lack of resources to build expertise and to have enough personnel to focus on pertinent emerging topics. The colonial structure based on military and resource inequalities, particularly within disarmament forums, remains dominant within the international law-making system. Whereas the highly militarised states have a monopoly in the weapons law arena, particularly in the CCW, small states from the Global South have developed new forms of knowledge-focused innovations, giving them enough agency to challenge dominant narratives in disarmament. Between 2017 and 2024, small states from the Global South, particularly in and through the G15, managed to evolve discussions on autonomous weapons systems to address their concerns. Although challenges persist and a legally binding instrument may take time to achieve, small state diplomats have been playing a key role in international diplomacy on autonomous weapons systems.

This paper has sought to advance discourse in postcolonial thinking – a perspective that has been unfortunately underexplored in both the study of small state diplomacy and autonomous weapons systems – and suggesting a recognition of practical approaches that not only critique existing structural inequalities but also propose alternatives. The empirical work here aligns with Ruwet et al. (2023), suggesting that small states from the Global South *are* capable of creating knowledge communities at the highest level that can influence global processes. This is not an argument to condone and maintain structural inequalities, but one to create knowledge systems that do not divorce themselves from but challenge and influence dominant structures. In this sense, it is essential to recognise and theorise based on the worldmaking efforts of the small state diplomats who work within such strained missions. The paper moves beyond the usual postcolonial critique of asymmetric systems, offering practical empirics for transforming an unequal multilateral system by pushing for alternative technocratic knowledge(s) and practice(s).

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⁹ Interview response, 25 September 2023.

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