Interview – Frank Sauer

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Dr. Frank Sauer studied political science, sociology, philosophy and international law at Goethe University Frankfurt, from where he also received his doctoral degree. He is the author of*Atomic Anxiety: Deterrence, Taboo, and the Non-Use of U.S. Nuclear Weapons* and the co-editor of the German language *Handbook of International Relations*. He works on international politics with a focus on security. He has done research on nuclear issues, terrorism, cyber security as well as emerging technologies, especially the military application of artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics. Frank is a leading member of the International Committee for Robot Arms Control. He also serves as a Senior Advisor on the International Panel on the Regulation of Autonomous Weapons as well as on the expert commission on the responsible use of technologies in the European 'Future Combat Air System'.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I've spent the last ten years working in an interdisciplinary fashion. For my research on autonomy in weapons systems, I spoke to AI experts, roboticists, moral philosophers, legal scholars and activists at United Nations more so than I did to IR scholars. I also read a lot in those disciplines, harking back to "genuine" IR topics only when drawing on literature on international norms and arms control. My last article was published in the International Review of the Red Cross, not what you would call an IR journal. So, in short, I'm not a hundred percent sure what "my field" is at this point. But what I can say is that among the last things that piqued my interest in IR proper were Wendt's book *Quantum Mind and Social Science* as well as some of the contributions to the so-called New Materialism, for example Jane Bennett's book *Vibrant Matter*. But I don't think these things – especially Wendt's book – moved the needle the same way they maybe would have in the past. There don't seem to be "great debates" (theoretically) advancing IR as a field as a whole anymore – if those ever really existed. Instead, IR strikes me as a very pluralistic, even, to some extent, compartmentalized endeavour nowadays. There's two ways of looking at this: One could view this as increasing the danger of scholars talking past each other and of the brand essence of IR being lost. That's the glass-half-empty view, I suppose. But IR always was a hodgepodge of disciplines anyway, and so the glass-half-full perspective is that more work in IR is focused on finding answers to real world problems – by pragmatically drawing on whatever is needed.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Tough question. I don't subscribe to a particular "school of thought" or "-ism", and I don't have a favourite thinker who provides me with clever quote to put at the beginning of every article I write. But a significant shift in my thinking was triggered by the understanding that not all sciences produce the same kind of knowledge. Take what the natural sciences have produced on a phenomenon like gravity as an example. We still don't really know what gravity is at a deep, quantum level. And the knowledge produced by the natural sciences is always only temporarily valid, of course. All its claims are always the state-of-the-art only for as long as something better has not yet been discovered or proven by using the commonly agreed upon methods of knowledge production and quality control. We can witness a time lapse of this incremental process on a daily basis during the ongoing pandemic. But, to get back to my example, we've arrived at a firm enough grasp on gravity to make fantastic predictions and calculations possible. We know about acceleration, motion, frames of reference, and I know that I will plunge to my death if I jump out of my office window – a reproducible result, should someone be foolish enough to repeat that same experiment. We also

knew that, absent any technical malfunctions, the newest Mars rover would touch down on Mars because the smart folks at NASA had calculated the trajectory.

So, while the truth claims of the natural science are necessarily limited (and we haven't even gone into the politicisation of science or the complications that science-and-technology-studies have revealed to exist), they are markedly different from the knowledge the social sciences – or IR, for that matter –produce. Even though there is a strong research community in IR that models their approach after the natural sciences, the discipline has produced nothing that is even close to what physics has produced about gravity in terms of nomothetic value. For a while, we thought the "Democratic Peace" is IR's first generalizable discovery comparable to a natural law. Well, not it's not, really. The flip side of all of this is that we're still having the same debate about, say, Realism vs. Idealism that, depending on who you ask, is a hundred or two thousand years old. In other words, while the natural sciences have a big and growing scrap heap of discarded theories, things that turned out to definitely being not true, such as the aether theories, we never completely disprove anything. But I guess that's alright because the objects of investigation we are concerned with in IR fundamentally differ from the rocks, neutrons and black holes that physicists deal with. "God gave physics the easy problems", Bernstein, Lebow, Gross Stein and Weber once said. They nailed it. To truly understand that was a major, quite humbling shift in my thinking.

In 2018, the US withdrew from the Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA). Later on, Iran announced its non-compliance with the agreement. How can Biden encourage Iran to comply with the original agreement?

Iran has taken numerous problematic but discrete and reversible steps over the last months and years, for instance regarding uranium enrichment. In addition, Iran recently escalated things considerably by announcing the suspension of the Additional Protocol. Thankfully, the IAEA and Iran reached an agreement so that some verification and monitoring can continue for now. Video monitoring data are exempt, however. And if sanctions are not lifted, Iran will delete these three months from now. This puts even more pressure on a situation that clearly was and remains to be quite worrisome. There is deep distrust on both sides, and US-Iranian relations will keep deteriorating as long as the deal is not put back together. Currently it looks like the two sides are waiting for the other one to make the first move. The Biden administration is offering to start new talks. But Biden's secretary of state Tony Blinken also keeps emphasizing that from a US point of view there is a lot that needs to happen before an agreement can be reached. So, it's unfortunately not as simple as the US just "re-entering". It might well be the case that the Biden administration is aiming for a "better deal" for domestic reasons, eyeing additional Iranian concessions – missile capabilities come to mind. This could complicate things further, and Iran, obviously disgruntled after suffering from years of "maximum pressure" by the US and General Soleimani being killed in a US drone strike, might even walk away in the end. We will have to see what the other parties to the agreement can contribute. The Europeans did not do great with the Instex mechanism and their efforts to uphold the economic end of the deal for the Iranians in light of US sanctions. Their influence remains somewhat limited. But my hope is nevertheless that in three months – if things go really well – there are talks underway to take this deal back on track to before Trump broke it. Fingers crossed.

Donald Trump claimed that the New START treaty between Russia and the United States favoured Russia and was not worth an extension. After a few days in the White House, Biden extended the agreement. What factors supported Biden's decision to sign the agreement in its previous form rather than renegotiate it? Should he have tried to include other parties, such as China?

Donald Trump was wrong. Joe Biden was right in extending New START right away. Only a couple of days were left before New START would have expired. There was no time to renegotiate, and without New START nuclear arms control between the US and Russia would have been thrown back decades. Biden also extended New START immediately after entering office. That sends a clear signal as to how important nuclear arms control is to his administration. That's encouraging. Now, the Trump administration did have a point in calling for China to be included in talks on nuclear arms control. But they went at it completely the wrong way, with empty threats, and with PR stunts such as placing little Chinese flags on the negotiating table in Vienna. It all seemed not only undiplomatic but, frankly, amateurish. China will – as long as the arsenals of the US and Russia remain that much bigger – politely, and with the new great-power-confidence China now displays routinely, keep declining any form of participation in the US-Russian START format. At the same time the medium range ballistic missile arsenal of China is of great

concern to both Russia and the US. So, if China is to be engaged in this field it could be a good idea to seek much wider talks on strategic stability. Recently emerging hi-tech capabilities – unmanned systems, for instance – are increasingly entangling the conventional and the nuclear domain, creating new instabilities and escalation risks. So rather than trying to force China, which barely has any experience in arms control anyway, into START, a more promising first step could be a trilateral format on strategic stability in a wider sense, also including cyber, space and emerging technologies. These things worry Russia, the US and China alike – and so they could serve as a shared point of entry.

In your book you talk about deterrence and what you call the "nuclear taboo" as two explanations for the non-use of nuclear weapons. What is the nuclear taboo and why is this distinction from deterrence important?

The nuclear taboo is a strong social norm rendering a first use of nuclear weapons wrong – something that is just not done, maybe not even seriously considered. It's a widespread normative understanding that ensures no civilized nation ever again creates destruction and suffering as witnessed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Mainstream deterrence theory is based on a rational actor model: *homo economicus*. The nuclear taboo, in contrast, is based on a social constructivist notion of *homo sociologicus* acting according to a logic of appropriateness rather than a logic of consequentialism. That's a fundamental difference. And this distinction is important because looking at the non-use of nuclear weapons after 1945 with the help of the nuclear taboo provides new answers and insights that deterrence fails to deliver. Take, for instance, this crucial question: If the essence of deterrence is that nuclear weapons have never been used between two or more nuclear powers, then why weren't nuclear weapons ever used in conflicts in which only one state had them and there was no threat of retaliation – such as the Korean War, the Vietnam War or the 1990/91 Gulf War? So, I can only encourage everyone in IR to especially engage with Nina Tannenwald's original work on this – it's totally brilliant. And there remains a lot to study and learn about the nuclear taboo. My own contribution – in *Atomic Anxiety*, my 2015 book you mentioned – was to seek the emotional underpinnings of the nuclear taboo but also of deterrence and of the phenomenon of nuclear non-use as a whole. Quite recently, survey studies have begun casting doubt on how robust the nuclear taboo really is regarding the US's general population – these findings are quite disturbing and warrant further research. And lastly, there's always the question of how universal the nuclear taboo really can be since it requires a couple of mechanisms that democracies are much more likely to develop than autocratic states. All in all, it's a very interesting and important concept.

In January 2021, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) went into effect. Given no country that publicly admits to possessing nuclear weapons voted in favour of the agreement, what are the practical consequences of the TPNW?

There won't be big, immediate practical consequences of the TPNW. But the treaty is in force now, the norm is now clearly stipulated, codified and "out there". One could say that the TPNW is making the nuclear taboo tangible. So, all members of the international community, including the nuclear weapons states, will sooner or later feel a need to adjust to that. There's a small risk that the TPNW could fracture the international non-proliferation landscape, creating an exit for non-nuclear weapons states who are fed up with the standstill in the NPT's non-proliferation regime. I don't consider this a big risk. The TPNW is designed to prevent that. Then there are some people who complain that the norm is only having an effect in democratic states in which civil society is part of the discourse and affecting policy decisions on nuclear weapons. To that I say: It is what it is. Democracy is great, is it not? In Germany, we can already see the first gentle shifts in the debate, for instance regarding nuclear sharing. The next government will not as easily be able to simply "abstain" from the TPNW process and not relate to it whatsoever even if they, which they might, consider it not on top of the list of their preferred instruments to reach the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons which every German government tends to stipulate. In short, the treaty will have an effect. But it's a slow burn, and the results are unclear. In fifty years from now, the treaty might have considerably changed our view on the role of nuclear weapons in international politics and diminished their acceptance as tools of state power, stigmatizing them even further. Don't get me wrong: I don't know for sure that this will be the outcome – no one knows. I'm not even particularly optimistic about it. But the TPNW clearly has that potential.

On your German podcast "Sicherheitshalber" you talked about the consequences of a NATO member

joining the TPNW in the future. What implications would that have for NATO's concept of nuclear sharing? Do you think nuclear sharing still has a future?

That's a lot of questions rolled up in one. First things first: I think we are a long way away from any NATO member joining the TPNW anytime soon. NATO folks will claim that this is a mutually exclusive affair because NATO is a "nuclear alliance" (which it wasn't for the longest time, but alright, here we are since 2010). The "International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons" will counter-argue that joining the TPNW is not a problem at all for NATO members. Be that as it may, I think it is in fact time for a critical look at nuclear sharing for a number of reasons. One, nuclear sharing is – and always has been – a bit dicey with regard to the NPT. You have to do a lot of legal jiu jitsu for it to pass the NPT test. Two, in geopolitical terms it is an "extra sausage", as we say in German, that we in the West have allowed ourselves for decades – and there might come the time when we're being called out for that. We certainly would not be enthusiastic if China were to start "sharing" nuclear capabilities with, I don't know, North Korea. Three, and most importantly, the B-61 gravity bombs in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey serve little to no military purpose – NATO plans for using them, obviously, but in reality there is no credible mission for them due to operational and political constraints. In that sense, nuclear sharing truly is a relic of the Cold War. And while I'm not sure about Turkey and Italy, the general population in Germany, Belgium and Netherlands clearly wants to get rid of the bombs anyway. But here's the rub: Those bombs remain an important political symbol for the alliance in terms of burden – or rather: threat – sharing as well as reassurance to the eastern NATO members. Hence, it's not quite as simple as it may seem at first glance.

We recently had a debate about nuclear sharing in Germany because Mr. Rolf Mützenich of the Social Democrats, one of the two parties currently forming the government, suggested using the window of opportunity which is currently open with the nearing end of service of the Tornado aircraft. Rather than committing for another couple of decades to nuclear sharing by procuring a new nuclear capable carrier system, his argument went, we should rather rip off the band-aid and get out of the arrangement now, sending the B-61s in Büchel home to the US. But within NATO, this would create considerable collateral damage and cost Germany a lot of political capital. Hence my idea would be to seek the end of nuclear sharing in a future nuclear disarmament framework with Russia instead. An agreement in which nuclear sharing, in exchange for Russian concessions, is among the items the West puts on the negotiation table. This would produce actual, tangible benefits in arms control terms rather than just Karma points with the Western nuclear disarmament community. It's recently become known that the US has been silently drawing down the numbers. Maybe the US's appetite to uphold nuclear sharing is dwindling as well? In sum, my hope is that the Biden administration can initiate a process with Russia that charts a path towards the end of nuclear sharing.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

IR is a fantastic field of study. But it is not a fantastic field to seek a career in. The academic job market is not only tough but, frankly, perverse in many respects. Until this changes at a fundamental level, people aiming for an academic career in IR need to be fully aware of the pitfalls, especially if they're planning to one day also have a family. So, the advice I, unfortunately, feel compelled to give is to always keep other options open. IR can set you up perfectly for a great many jobs outside of academia. The trick is to know when to take that step.