

Title: Imagining the Unimaginable: War, Weapons, and Procurement Politics
Speaker: Sanne Cornelia J. Verschuren, Ph.D.
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SYNOPSIS:

Why and how do states decide to develop different weapon capabilities within a similar military domain? Contrary to the existing literature, I argue that ideas, particularly those about the future, play a critical role in shaping states' decisions about military technology. Based on original archival evidence and in-depth interviews with key defense stakeholders, I contend that domestic actors' ideas about future warfare—what I call the “images of warfare,” consisting of actors' perceptions of the threat environment and their theory of victory—shape actors' preferences for particular military capabilities. Not all of these ideas, however, are equally influential. I therefore trace how those within the military, the legislative and executive branches, the industry, and the community of defense analysts bargain over their technological preferences. In order to transform ideas into actual capabilities, I argue that actors need to build a cross-cutting coalition within the broader defense community around their “imagined security interests,” while exploiting the state's political opportunity structure. To test this theory, I use comparative case studies, in which I analyze the development of missile defenses from the 1980s until today in the United States, United Kingdom, and France, as well as employ illustrative examples from the pursuit of air power (1920s-1930s), and aircraft carriers (1950s-1960s) in those same countries.

BIO:

Sanne Cornelia J. Verschuren is a Marie Curie Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center for International Studies of Sciences Po. Her research interests include the development of military technology, shifts in military strategy and tactics, and the role of ideas and norms therein. Her book project examines why and how states decide to procure different weapon capabilities within similar domains of warfare. Sanne's dissertation won the 2022 Kenneth Waltz Outstanding Dissertation Award from APSA's International Security Section. Sanne also works on questions around the global arms trade, trends in armament and disarmament, and the politics of deterrence. Before joining Sciences Po, Sanne was a postdoctoral fellow with the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University and a predoctoral research fellow with the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. Sanne's research has been supported by the European Commission, the National Science Foundation, the Horowitz Foundation for Social Policy, and the Belgian American Education Foundation, among others. Sanne received her Ph.D. in Political Science from Brown University in August 2021.