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Taking a game-theoretic approach to customary international law, this article uses the model of a multilateral prisoner's dilemma to show that contrary to the arguments of some critics, it is plausible that states would comply with customary international law under certain conditions. This model identifies the relevant parameters, which include the value of cooperation and whether that value rises or falls with the number of states involved, the patience of states, the frequency of interaction, and the types of other relationships between the relevant states. Some of these parameters are amenable to empirical observation and to manipulation through institutional change.

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Drawing on theories from international relations and international law, this article explores the interactions of three design features of international agreements: legality, depth of cooperation, and monitoring/enforcement systems. An understanding of the trade-offs between these features, and of the influence of domestic actors and institutions on treaty making, deepens our perception of agreement dynamics and can contribute to the design of more effective and robust international accords.

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