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Postcolonial Perspectives on Nuclear Non-Proliferation

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Biography

Alex Chung graduated in 2013 with an MA in International Relations (IR) from the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in Sydney, Australia. He is currently under supervision of A/Prof John Rees at the University of Notre Dame Australia (UNDA), and has completed his thesis titled, *Legitimacy of Humanitarian Intervention: A Liberal Defence*. Under the supervision of Dr. Mark Rolfe at UNSW, he completed his thesis titled, *An Examination of U.S. Drone Discourse Through the Context of Power, Authority and Legitimacy*. He will be continuing on with Higher Degree Research (HDR) in Australia.

His research interests lie in International Security Studies (ISS), Post-colonialism, International Humanitarian Law (IHL), International Human Rights Law (HRL), gender and sexual studies, disability rights advocacy, and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine. Alex's family fled from Hong Kong to Toronto, Canada after the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989. Alex was raised in the quiet suburb of Scarborough and still finds time to enjoy his childhood pastime of skiing during the brief snow seasons in Australia.

Abstract

Nuclear weapons were introduced to the world over 65 years ago by the United States with the purpose of winning WWII against the Axis powers. The destructive nature of nuclear weapons presents an existential threat to the very survival of the human species.

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) envisioned the end of nuclear weapons, by recognising five Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) – US, Russia, China, France, and Britain. Opposition to the NPT regime has led to accusations of irrationality and the label of ‘rogue states’, undeserving and incapable of handling the responsibility of a nuclear arsenal. As Western powers move towards increasingly hawkish positions against the ‘rogue’ North Korea and Iran, the presence of significantly more advanced nuclear arsenals possessed by Israel, Pakistan and India have largely been ignored.

The exclusive nature of the NPT and the alignment of NWS status with the UNSC P-5 are indicative of an international regime that perpetuates inequity between nuclear ‘haves’ and nuclear ‘have-nots’. This paper seeks to approach nuclear non-proliferation from the perspective of those states considered marginalised by the international nuclear regime. It highlights the Eurocentric assumptions of international regimes, and the delegitimization of non-Western perspectives on issues of nuclear security.

Keywords: Non-proliferation, NPT, Nuclear Weapons, Rogue State, North-South, Postcolonialism, Iran, Israel, North Korea, Pakistan, India

Postcolonial Perspectives: The World from the ‘Other’ Side

Security studies have traditionally been concerned with relations between ‘great powers’, within a hierarchy of stronger and weaker sovereign territorial states (Barkawi & Laffey 2006, p. 329). The field of security politics has largely been blind to and disregarded the security needs and interests of ‘small’ or ‘weak’ states by conceptualising security primarily around the organisation of ‘great power’ politics, underpinned by Eurocentric and racist assumptions (Biswas, *forthcoming* 2012). “Security studies is by and for Western powers,” (Barkawi & Laffey 2006, p. 344). There exists a rather limited awareness in international relations (IR) of ‘non-Western’ perspectives on global politics, thus constructing what Ken Booth remarked as IR’s “ethnocentric, masculinised, northern and top-down” formulation (Bilgin 2008, p. 6-7). Within the international system, “the taken-for-granted historical geographies that underpin security systematically understate and misrepresent the role of what we now call the global South in security relations,” (Barkawi & Laffey 2006, p. 330). Western constituted social science and humanities have largely ignored the impact of the postcolonial agenda and the Global South and on international norms and practices (Grovgui 2011, p. 178). Agency is presumed to be in the hands of the ‘great powers’ and western political perspectives are constructed as and considered to be the pinnacle of international norms (Barkawi & Laffey 2006, p. 340). This paper seeks to approach the question of nuclear security and nuclear nonproliferation from the perspective of those states that see themselves as marginalised by an unequal global security architecture, and demonstrate how the current nuclear non-proliferation regime perpetuates logics of Eurocentric and colonial violence and inequity.

Nuclear weapons were introduced to the world over 65 years ago by the United States with the purpose of winning a war against the Axis powers of Japan and Germany (Daadler & Lodal 2008, p. 80). The destructive nature of nuclear weapons presents a tremendous existential threat to the safety and security of the world. In the words of Rajiv Gandhi, addressing the UN General Assembly on 9 June 1988, “Nuclear war will not mean the death of a hundred million people. Or even a thousand million. It will mean the extinction of four thousand million: the end of life as we know it on our planet earth,” (Shultz et al. 2007, p. 2). Accordingly, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) envisioned the end of nuclear weapons, as the most universally accepted arms control agreement with 189 state members, by recognising five Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) – the US, Russia, China, France, and Britain (Peterson 2010). In return for the promise by all NWS states to completely disarm, and assistance in the acquisition of civilian nuclear energy technology, all Non-Nuclear Weapon States (NNWS) forever forego obtaining nuclear weapons, thereby preventing horizontal proliferation with the stated goal of complete global nuclear disarmament (Gusterson 1999, p. 113). It is significant to note that international institutions such as the UN and the nuclear non-proliferation regime “are largely the product of interstate diplomacy dominated by Western great powers,” (Barkawi & Laffey 2006, p. 331). The five NWS states also hold the five permanent member seats on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), leading some to criticise the NPT for legitimising and institutionalising nuclear power at the hands of the very few, and at the same time prohibiting the pursuit of nuclear security by the rest of the world (Biswas 2001, p. 486; Biswas, *forthcoming* 2012). While there have been

symbolic reductions in the nuclear stockpiles of the NWS states via bilateral and multilateral treaties, the indefinite and unconditional extension of the NPT in 1995 continues to legitimise the existence of nuclear weapons in the hands of the NWS/P-5, allowing them to modernise their nuclear arsenals, and engage in vertical nuclear proliferation without interference from the international community (Singh 1998, p. 41).

The exclusive nature of the NPT and the alignment of NWS status with the UNSC P-5 is indicative of an international regime that perpetuates logics of colonial violence, oppression, and inequity as represented by the emblematic clash between nuclear “haves” and nuclear “have-nots” (Biswas 2001, p. 486; Peterson 2010). As such, the institutionalised demarcation of NWS and NNWS states has led to accusations of “nuclear apartheid” (Biswas 2001, p. 486; Singh 1998, p. 48). Put simply, “nuclear apartheid” highlights the material inequalities in the distribution of global nuclear resources – “inequities that are written into, institutionalised, and legitimised through some of the major arms-control treaties, creating an elite club of nuclear ‘haves’ with exclusive rights to maintain nuclear arsenals that are to be denied to the vast majority of nuclear ‘have nots’,” (Biswas 2001, p. 486). This is evidenced by the United States having “worked diligently to preserve its nuclear supremacy” since 1945; by attempting to keep the nuclear “secret” in perpetuity, by limiting America’s European allies’ ability to command atomic weapons independently, and endeavouring, unsuccessfully, to keep the Middle East and South Asia free of nuclear weapons (Maddock cited in Rotter 2011, p. 1175).

Resistance to Northern domination of the international system is often delegitimised by the West, leading to labels such as ‘rogue states’ or ‘terrorism’. The term ‘rogue state’ is used in political science literature to describe, “a class of states that combines the seeming irrationality and fanaticism of terror groups with the military assets of states,” (Rose 2011, p. 1). ‘Rogue states’ are presumed to lack rationality, presenting a significant and unpredictable danger, as a result of “underlying presumed bad intent of its leadership,” (Smith 2000, p. 119). “The claim to rational decision-making is frequently used by great powers to justify the possession of nuclear weapons. Conversely, the purported lack of rationality on the part of other states, particularly revolutionary regimes like Cuba or Iran, is routinely invoked to explain why they cannot be trusted with nuclear weapons,” (Barkawi & Laffey 2006, p. 338). This is coupled with the common perception in the West that, “while we can live with the nuclear weapons of the five official nuclear nations for the indefinite future, the proliferation of nuclear weapons to nuclear-threshold states in the Third World, especially the Islamic world, would be enormously dangerous,” (Gusterson 1999, p. 112).

The following sections will demonstrate how the Eurocentric nature of neorealist and liberal approaches to nuclear proliferation perpetuate logics of colonial violence and inequity, via critical analysis through postcolonial paradigms.

NeoRealists and the 'Traditional' Nuclear Paradigm

The traditional neo-realist security paradigm perceives nuclear weapons as either “deterrents against overwhelming conventional military threats or as coercive tools to compel changes in the status quo,” (Sagan 1997, p. 57). Realist and neo-realist nuclear perspectives were underpinned by the MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) doctrine – wherein state actors maximise their security by behaving ‘rationally’, given the anarchic nature of the world (Seliktar 2011, p. 190). For neorealists, the end of the ‘Cold War’ marked the end of the bipolar distribution of power that was considered to be more stable than the introduction of the post-Cold War multipolar arrangement of power. This resulted in the acceleration of nuclear proliferation (Chafetz 1993, p. 127). Anxiety over proliferation persisted after the Cold War due to the fact that those considered ‘rogue states’ were among those hoping to join the ‘nuclear club’, thus igniting serious debate on ‘rationality’ (Seliktar 2011, p. 191). Promoters of ‘planned’ or ‘managed’ proliferation such as Waltz see the proliferation of nuclear weapons as both inevitable and not a cause for alarm, given the overwhelming power of nuclear deterrence; “the ability of a state, not to defend itself, but to threaten an adversary with unacceptable damage if attacked,” (Gavin 2012, p. 574). Many neorealist political scientists, including Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, William Riker, and John Mearsheimer have promoted the ‘managed’ or ‘planned’ proliferation argument, advocating for the spread of nuclear weapons into key areas, such as Ukraine and Germany, where non-nuclear states face nuclear armed enemies, based on the belief that “the chance of bilateral conflict becoming nuclear decreases to zero when all nations are nuclear armed,” (Sagan 1994, p. 66). The basis for the neorealists’ confidence in deterrence is the ‘long peace’ maintained between the United States and the Soviet Union during the ‘Cold War’ (Sagan 1994, p. 66). However, even supporters of ‘managed’ or ‘planned’ proliferation in the neorealist school do not agree with uncontrolled nuclear proliferation (Frankel 1993, p. 39). In the debate surrounding deterrence and its applicability to ‘rogue states’, Mearsheimer stated that the “logic of controlled proliferation might not extend to Third World dictatorships,” (Seliktar 2011, p. 192).

For realists, IR theory is based on great power politics (Barkawi & Laffey 2006, p. 331). Neorealist and realist perspectives on nuclear proliferation are based on ‘rationality’ constructed via Western dominated narratives of World War II and the ‘Cold War’ (Biswas, *forthcoming* 2012; Frankel 1993, p. 40). The Eurocentric IR paradigm regards the weak and powerless as “marginal or derivative elements of world politics,” (Barkawi & Laffey 2006, p. 332). Rationality and objectivity are firmly attributed to ‘great powers’ as demonstrated by the scholarly analysis of the ‘Cuban Missile Crisis’. Cubans were depicted as politicised, whereas Americans and Soviets were characterised as apolitical (Barkawi & Laffey 2006, p. 338). Agency rests on the ‘great powers’, while the security interests and actions of ‘weak’ states in the ‘Global South’, such as Cuba, are conveniently ignored or disregarded (Barkawi & Laffey 2006, p. 329; Biswas, *forthcoming* 2012). The one-sided and Eurocentric logic of ‘planned’ proliferation, which promotes horizontal proliferation to those states that neorealists deem ‘rational’ and ‘objective’ is merely a reproduction of the superpower-based ‘Cold War’ era thinking. These ideologies disregarded the agency of the ‘weak’ and

‘powerless’, and the importance of the Global South or ‘Third World’ in affecting international affairs, and arbitrarily assigned rationality and objectivity to the great powers.

While the end the ‘Cold War’ transformed and ameliorated much of the security concerns of Europe and the West, it did little to resolve the widespread feelings of insecurity elsewhere in the world (Biswas, *forthcoming* 2012; Singh 1998, p. 41). The ‘Cold War’ in many non-Western parts of the world, including Vietnam, Korea, Afghanistan, and the many other states that served as proxies for superpower rivalry, were in fact very real and very ‘hot’ (Biswas, *forthcoming* 2012). The deterrence logic that serves as the fundamental basis for neorealist proliferation theory has been derived from the postwar period of bipolarity (Frankel 1993, p. 40). Through the myopic lenses of neorealist proliferation theory, no consideration is given to ‘vertical proliferation’ of the great powers, specifically in the United States and Russia. Such proliferation is not viewed as a problem, nor is the possibility of a global convention abolishing nuclear weapons, as proposed by various nonaligned nations, especially India, been discussed as a practical solution to the security dilemma that nuclear weapons pose (Gusterson 1999, p. 114). The ‘managed’ proliferation solution that many neorealists ascribe to is nonetheless racialised and Eurocentric. Waltz suggests that in a new multipolar world, Germany, Japan, and possibly Italy should be *allowed* to acquire nuclear weapons (Seliktar 2011, p. 192). ‘Planned’ or ‘managed’ proliferation is simply a convenient euphemism for deciding which state should receive approval to acquire nuclear weapons based on an arbitrary, Eurocentric, and subjective assessment of rationality. The neorealist perspective merely serves to perpetuate an already flawed and unequal system, continuing to put the ‘West’ or the ‘North’ on some type of intellectual pedestal that affirms its own image of rationality and objectivity, thereby denying any meaningful agency or possibility of equality for all states in the world.

Liberal Exclusionism

Unlike neorealists, liberals do not entirely disregard the existence of ‘weak’ states, but they are merely of interest, “primarily as bearers of rights and objects of emancipation...for their normative value in Western political theoretic terms,” (Barkawi & Laffey 2006, p. 333). Whereas “realist approaches to security studies are Eurocentric in that they locate agency and history with the great powers,” liberal approaches are equally Eurocentric, in addition to defining the West “in ethical and progressive terms,” (Barkawi & Laffey 2006, p. 340). In the Western imagination, discourse on nuclear proliferation is deeply entrenched in relation to the Third World, dividing the world into states that can be trusted with nuclear weapons and those that cannot (Gusterson 1999, p. 113). Liberals and conservatives alike hold the following orthodox belief: “the proliferation of nuclear weapons to nuclear-threshold states in the Third World, especially the Islamic world, would be enormously dangerous,” (Gusterson 1999, p. 112). Nuclear apartheid is justified in the liberal mindset, since western democracies have the moral imperative and ethical superiority to impose their will for the good of the ‘other’.

Edward Said asserts that Orientalist discourse demarcates the world in a binary opposition that presents the 'Orient' as the mirror image of the West, "where 'we' are rational and disciplined; 'they' are impulsive and emotional; where 'we' are modern and flexible, 'they' are slaves to ancient passions and routines; where 'we' are honest and compassionate, 'they' are treacherous and uncultivated," (Gusterson 1999, p. 114). This Orientalist process has an effect of creating an immense sense of 'Otherness' separating the Third World from liberal Western democracies, thereby rationalising and internalising a sense of liberal 'superiority' (Gusterson 1999, p. 114). Empirically, this construct of ethical superiority in the liberal West requires Orwellian self-delusion. As purported by Barkawi & Laffey (2006, p. 341), the Holocaust presents a challenge to the liberal faith in the "Western myths of progress and ethical superiority." To maintain the Western belief in liberal superiority, the "sins of Western civilisation" are displaced "onto an intrusive non-European Other...Germany, that quintessentially Western society, somehow becomes not Western," (Barkawi & Laffey 2006, p. 341). Furthermore, the brutal and barbaric slaughter and loss of life amongst 'natives' was a normative feature of European colonisation and expansion into the non-European world (Barkawi & Laffey 2006, p. 343). As observed by Sven Lindqvist, "the Holocaust was unique – in Europe. But the history of Western expansion in other parts of the world shows many examples of total extermination of whole peoples," (Barkwai & Laffey 2006, p. 343).

Liberal ideology legitimates domination over the Global South. This can be observed via liberal Western discourse on nuclear proliferation as it "legitimizes the nuclear monopoly of the recognised nuclear powers," (Gusterson 1999, p. 115). Much like neorealism, rationality and objectivity is arbitrarily assigned to the West, while the Global South or 'Third World' is considered to be subjective, irrational, or even 'rogue' and therefore incapable of the responsibility of a nuclear arsenal. The inherent Eurocentricism in liberal ideology directly results in a "taken-for-granted politics that sides with the rulers, with the powerful, with the imperialists, and not with the downtrodden, the weak, the colonised, or the post-colonised," (Barkawi & Laffey 2006, p. 344)

For example, Iran has been demonised by the United States since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, when citizens of the Islamic Republic laid siege to the US embassy compound in Tehran, and took fifty-two American hostages for 444 days (Zenko 2012). Their suspected nuclear weapons program and alleged sponsorship of terrorism have deemed them a 'rogue state' (BBC 2001; Munoz 2012). US President Obama issued a warning to Iran in a September 2012 speech to the UN General Assembly, stating unequivocally, "The United States will do what we must to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon...It would threaten the elimination of Israel, the security of Gulf nations and the stability of the global economy," (ABC News 2012). North Korea, an NPT non-signatory and nuclear state is perceived to pursue "alien objectives which are normative anathema to the rest of the 'civilised' international system," leading to the assumption that the North Korean state is acting fundamentally outside the norms of the global community, and is therefore clearly a "rogue state" (Smith 2000, p. 115). Nicholas Eberstadt wrote that, "the North Korean regime *is* the North Korean nuclear problem," (Smith 2000, p. 118).

These Eurocentric and racist assumptions in liberal IR theory have led to obvious and problematic ‘double standards’ and inequities in the treatment of non-Western states, exacerbated by the existing Northern dominated nuclear non-proliferation regime. While Iran has suffered debilitating economic sanctions over suspicions of an *unconfirmed* clandestine nuclear weapons program, Israel, one of only four NPT non-signatories, and the sole state in the Middle East that actually possesses nuclear weapons, has remained free from any meaningful, significant, or even symbolic international oversight (Steinbach 2011, p. 34). Warren Kozak (2012) epitomises the unashamed and blatant Eurocentricism of the liberal Western perspective on the issue of nuclear proliferation:

“Few people lost a wink of sleep over the American nuclear monopoly in the 1940s- and when the Saudis or Syrians or Egyptians have turned off their lights over the past half-century, the last worry on their minds has been being blown to bits by an Israeli nuclear bomb...the sound mind understands that [Israel], the only stable democracy in the Middle East, is also one of its few rational actors.”

Conclusion

As remarked by E. H. Carr in 1977, “[t]he study of international relations in English speaking countries is simply a study of the best way to run the world from positions of strength,” (Barkawi & Laffey 2006, p. 349). I find the Eurocentric nature of international relations, institutions, treaties, and the elitism of the nuclear non-proliferation regime to be an unjustifiable concentration of power in the hands of a very few at the expense of the vast majority of the world. The current nuclear non-proliferation regime merely serves to reinforce and perpetuate logics of colonial violence and inequality. In my opinion, as per the India’s nuclear policy, the only fair and just security solution is the following: “in a world of nuclear proliferation lies either in global disarmament or in the exercise of the principle of equal and legitimate security for all,” (Singh 1998, p. 41).

There are those who believe that a world free of all nuclear weapons presents one of the greatest security achievements, including President Ronald Reagan who suggested to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1986 that the United States and the Soviet Union mutually commit to a nuclear-weapon free world (Blechman & Bollfrass 2008, p. 569). The famous ‘Gang of Four’, consisting of George P. Schultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger and Sam Nunn, are all dedicated to a world free of nuclear weapons, and believe that there are pragmatic and feasible measures of achieving security for all, without the need for nuclear weapons of enormous and inhumane destructive power (Daadler and Lodal 2008; Schultz et al. 2007). Their vision has been endorsed by “no less than two-thirds of all living former secretaries of state, former secretaries of defense, and former national security advisers,” (Daadler & Lodal 2008, p. 81). There is an ideal attraction to the ‘logic of zero’ in that it fulfils our global need for security without compromising on equality for all nations. In the words of Daadler & Lodal (2008, p. 95):

“It will take a real commitment, at the highest levels beginning with the United States, to turn the logic of zero into a practical reality. Many obstacles remain along this path, but it is important that Washington take the lead in setting out on that journey.”

Ronald Reagan described nuclear weapons as, “totally irrational, totally inhumane, good for nothing but killing, possibly destructive of life on earth and civilisation,” (Schultz et al. 2007, p. 2). If our collective civilisation has truly reached a stage of enlightenment and cosmopolitanism, then surely there must be a way to resolve regional and global confrontations between states, without the need for nuclear weapons. Human civilisation need not stand idly by and allow the needs of the many to be swept aside by the needs of the few. Global nuclear disarmament is the only foreseeable future where we can achieve a peaceful and secure world, free of the shackles of colonial dominance and inequality.

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