

A Biopolitical and Necropolitical Analysis of Nuclear Weapon Proliferation

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EMMA CLARK, JUL 18 2019

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was predicted that the strength and resolve of nuclear weapons would no longer have the same influence in global politics (Gartzke and Kroenig 2009). Irrespective of these predictions, several states have challenged the non-proliferation regime by testing nuclear weapons or pursuing nuclear technologies with the hope of, eventually, going nuclear. Others have chosen to remain non-nuclear. What explains these patterns is the focus of this essay.

This essay will be structured in three parts. It is necessary to underscore neorealism's view of international politics and the power of nuclear weapons as a form of deterrence. At odds with the threatening nature of the external security environment, very few states have chosen to go nuclear, which can be explained by the presence of the non-proliferation regime. The second section outlines the theoretical contributions of biopolitics and necropolitics, noting that the global nuclear regime controls and subordinates those who do not have them. It will argue that decisions by 'Third World' countries to develop nuclear weapons can be explained as the desire to be fully sovereign and prevent Western power projection and control (Kroenig 2014). In essence, numerous countries have chosen to dismiss international norms regarding non-proliferation that they believe maintains Western hegemonic power structures (Allinson 2015: 113). This essay will argue the decision of countries to go nuclear, irrespective of the non-proliferation regime, can be attributed to the system of control and power projection that 'legitimate' nuclear states have over those without such weapons (Furhmann and Horowitz 2015).

Neorealism provides the foundational assumptions for rational deterrence. Neorealism emphasises the anarchic environment of the international system, which results in the security dilemma: A state's pursuit of security results in other states feeling less secure (Herz 1950; Sagan 1997; Waltz 1981). Knowing the hostility of the international environment, states are driven to pursue deterrence-based policies that not only indicate the strength of their resolve to other states but also to deter them from pursuing their desired policies (Waltz 1981). What threatens the survival of states is not internal problems, but the external environment (Sing and Way 2004).

Rational deterrence focuses on the 'peace' experienced since the end of World War II and attributes it to two main factors: The shift from multipolarity to bipolarity, and the creation of nuclear weapons (Sagan and Waltz 2003: 4; Waltz 1981: 1-4). Per Waltz, the introduction of nuclear weapons between great powers made the cost of conflict too high (Asal and Beardsley 2007, 2009; Waltz 1981: 3). Once a state and its adversary have developed second-strike capabilities, mutually assured destruction deters both from escalating conflict (Waltz 1990: 734 in Ogilvie-White 1996: 45). The advent of nuclear weapons, it can be theorised, makes balancing, deterring and coercing an adversary easier should they convince them that the possibility for nuclear conflict is greater than zero (Asal and Beardsley 2007, 2009; Gartzke and Kroenig 2009).

If the assumptions of rational deterrence hold, all states should seek to acquire nuclear weapons – or ally with someone who has them – to ensure their survival (Ogilvie-White 1996). If such logic holds, what should be evident is a rapid growth in the number of states aiming for, or achieving, proliferation. Empirical evidence instead shows the poor predictive value of rational deterrence: Few states have chosen to develop nuclear weapons, and nation-states who are both insecure and have strong incentives to proliferate have not done so (Gartzke and Kroenig 2009; Lavoy

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1993; Ogilvie-White 1996). This evidence indicates that proliferation is not based on a state's ability to do so, but rather their desire for nuclear weapons (Gartzke and Kroenig 2009; Sing and Way 2004).

Furthermore, rational deterrence theory is based on probabilistic assumptions. The logic of deterrence assumes the possibility that nuclear weapons may be used is what deters the adversary (Asal and Bearsley 2007; Powell 2003). Here lies a fallacy with the logic of deterrence: A state must credibly threaten to use a weapon that, if mobilised, results in their mutual destruction (Powell 2003). No state can credibly threaten to use nuclear weapons without reversing the reasons for proliferating in the first place; that is, to ensure their own survival. Furthermore, the reasons typically employed to explain proliferation are based on the justifications the legitimate nuclear states provided for developing the atomic bomb (Ogilvie-White 1996). As such, when attempting to explain the dynamics behind India, Pakistan and Israel's decisions to proliferate, the same reasons and justifications are expected to hold. This results in an inaccurate and misleading explanation for proliferation; the reasons to go nuclear are assumed to be universal and are indifferent to cultural and ethnographic differences (Ogilvie-White 1996: 43-4).

The external validity of rational deterrence is weakened as a result of the non-proliferation regime, which encompasses a variety of treaties aimed at preventing horizontal proliferation and nuclear weapons testing. Particular agreements, including the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) (1970) specifically outline those who have the power to hold such weapons and those who do not.[1] Thus the logic of rational deterrence does not hold in nuclear weapons policy; evidently, not all leaders or states are rational, for such treaties would not otherwise exist. This implicitly assumes those who legitimately hold nuclear weapons are rational, responsible states, while those banned from doing so are irrational, irresponsible states. Such logic is evident in the failure to punish or prevent vertical proliferation in the legitimate nuclear weapons states. This is simultaneously a reflection of both the current global order and the power structures they produce (Allinson 2015; Biswas 2001: 491). The needs of the great powers are not only institutionalised but simultaneously work to undermine the rights and concerns of those below them in the global hierarchy.

If the danger attached to nuclear weapons is a reflection of who proliferates rather than proliferation itself, the topic of interest is not why the nuclear states developed the bomb, but the criteria that allow them to hold these weapons while others cannot (Biswas 2001: 497-8). The non-proliferation regime can reasonably explain why numerous states have chosen not to develop nuclear weapons, namely, the fear of punishments in the form of diplomatic exclusion, economic sanctions and public outcry. What is important to explain is why some states have chosen to proliferate knowing they will fall victim to these punishments. This is the point at which the theoretical fusion of biopolitics and necropolitics can explain not only why some states have chosen to proliferate, but the logic behind the non-proliferation regime.

Biopolitics, as defined by Foucault, is the sovereign's control of the biological (Dillon 2007: 10-1; Shaw 2013: 540). Biopolitics is often defined in opposition to that of the judicial-legal mechanisms of traditional sovereignty; the focus of the latter is on maintaining the security of the state, whereas the former is centred around the need to protect the individuals within said territory (Collier and Lakoff 2015: 21). Through the use of surveillance and management, biopower works to regulate, control and protect 'life' through government mechanisms and technologies (Allinson 2015: 114; Hardt and Negri 2005 in Ramsey 2012). This coincides with another shift in sovereignty's logic: The sovereign no longer takes the lives of threatening bodies but works to make life live (Shaw 2013). This is achieved through the coding of populations according to inscribed differences. Individuals become a force to be controlled should the sovereign believe they may harm the body politic (Vukov 2016). This inscription of difference onto flesh becomes naturalized and taken-for-granted. The deaths of such individuals are attributed to the sovereign's decision to place threatening life outside the protection of the law, meaning the threat they pose to the populace justifies disallowing life to the point of death. Though Foucault did not directly deal with nuclear weapons or the possibility of nuclear war, it is possible to apply this logic to such issues. The emphasis is necessarily on the element of technology and the destruction that can be caused by such mechanisms (Foucault 1981: 137 in Ramsay 2012: 71). This shift within the logic of the sovereign necessarily produced with it a collapse in the mechanisms of death and death-dealing. This relates specifically to Foucault's idea that no longer was the sovereign concerned with their right to kill; the preservation of life, with 'life' referring to those only worthy of valuable life, required forms of death-dealing that simultaneously killed one 'group' whilst ensuring the survival of the Other (Foucault 1994: 416 in Ramsay 2012: 71;

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Schlosser 2008: 1622). The desire for technologies with the capacity to cause widespread devastation not just in the immediate period of its use, but also in its aftermath, resulted in the production of technologies whose sheer purpose is to expose populations to death with the sole purpose of maintaining the survival of the Other (Allison 2015: 113; Foucault 1981: 137 in Ramsay 2012: 71). The emphasis is now on bodies, particularly threatening ones, and the means by which they can be controlled or eliminated in a manner that does not harm valuable life (Schlosser 2008).

Necropolitics is the reformulation of biopower and its understanding of sovereignty. Sovereignty no longer works to reduce life to the point death is inevitable, but intentionally takes life based on ascribed differences between populations (Allinson 2015; Biswas 2001; Mbembe 2003). Necropolitics emphasises that sovereignty is not necessarily concerned with the struggle for individual autonomy, but rather as an instrument to be mobilised as a means to control and destroy bodies and populations (Mbembe 2003: 14). The distinctions between populations are informed by the history of colonialism and racialised assumptions (McCoy 2005; Schwab 2014; Vucetic 2011 in Allinson 2015). Given the emphasis and normality of colonialism in both political and philosophical thought and practice, such experiences and the logic 'gained' from such is ingrained within our expectations and stereotyping of foreign bodies; they are imagined as being worth less than, with notions of barbarism commonplace. Colonisers frequently emphasised the necessity of their experience by describing the nature of those colonised. They are savages, in zones of lawlessness characterised by frequent brutality; they are discussed as if they are a type of animal never seen before, particularly savage and embodied in an appearance similar to that of the coloniser, but markedly different (Mbembe 2003: 24, 25). Racism becomes a form of power insofar as the killing of dangerous subpopulations is necessary for the survival of those further up the hierarchy; the ones deserving of protection. Based on these ascribed identities, such groups exist beyond the safety of the law to the point their death is permissible (Allinson 2015; Carrigan 2010: 269; Mbembe 2003: 24, 26). This logic replicates that of the slave and its master; their master is less a fellow citizen than a nation-state who can lawfully manage, subordinate, and exterminate 'threatening' subpopulations based on their existence (Fishel and Wilcox 2017: 340).

Applying these theoretical insights to nuclear weapons, their role as a biopolitical tool used in a necropolitical way is evident. Nuclear weapons control and regulate life, but also indicate the exclusive nature of sovereignty available to only those with the power to enact death (Dillon 2007; Shaw 2013). That such weapons can both subordinate and destroy life demonstrates not only the institutionalised distinction between valuable and invaluable life but that the power to kill lies with those who have nuclear weapons (Allinson 2015; Carrigan 2010). This is evident in the NPT's explicit focus on horizontal proliferation; it is not the existence of nuclear weapons that is dangerous but rather who holds them. The hypocrisy of the non-proliferation regime is evident in the domestication of atomic weapons for recognised nuclear states, who simultaneously produce apocalyptic, end-of-the-world narratives about the dangers of horizontal proliferation. This is part of the process of racialising the Other; their potential to consume and threaten the superior body is what allows for their extermination and management (Biswas 2001; Fishel and Wilcox 2017).

Attempting or successfully developing nuclear weapons in the face of the non-proliferation regime and its proscribed punishments is a three-fold process. It is not only about reclaiming sovereignty and preventing Western power projection, but also challenging the racialised assumptions evident in who can legitimately proliferate and who cannot (Payne 2007 in Asal and Beardsley 2007; Virilo and Lotringer 2008 in Ramsey 2012). Legislation that focuses on preventing horizontal, whilst allowing for vertical proliferation, confirms that of concern to the legitimate nuclear weapons states is their irrational and inferior adversary attaining them.

There is a multitude of reasons that explain why states proliferate. Explaining the decision to go nuclear as the result of one condition of international life is limiting and ignorant to the influence of other factors. The literature on rational deterrence theorises the power of such weapons lies in their ability to deter and influence the outcome of the conflict in favour of de-escalation (Asal and Beardsley 2007, 2009; Gartzke and Kroenig 2009). Despite empirical evidence confirming this, very few states have chosen to go nuclear. This can be attributed to the non-proliferation regime, which is embodied in a variety of treaties and statutes. Implicit in such legislation is the assumption that those who have nuclear weapons legitimately are seen as rational, responsible states, while those without them, or those who attempt proliferation are the opposite. This is evident with horizontal proliferation as opposed to vertical. The focal point of proliferation policies are thus not the act of proliferation itself, but who proliferates. The fusion of bio and necropolitics theorises a new understanding of the nuclear proliferation regime. The West's colonial history continues

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to inform and influence global nuclear policy insofar as assumptions of who is and is not responsible enough to hold nuclear weapons are generated based on such imaginaries. The decision of non-nuclear states to proliferate can be explained as the desire to reclaim sovereignty, prevent Western power projection, and challenge racialised assumptions. In sum, certain states hold nuclear weapons because they have the right to, others are acquiring or attempting to develop them for the reasons listed above, and others are committed to remaining non-nuclear as a result of a cost-benefit analysis of proliferation, where the costs outweigh the benefits.

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Notes

[1] Three of the four more recent proliferators, India, Pakistan and Israel, have never been a party to the NPT.

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