

**THE 8<sup>TH</sup> ROK-UN JOINT CONFERENCE ON DISARMAMENT AND NON-  
PROLIFERATION ISSUES  
16-18 November 2009**

**Philosophical Approaches: Idealism vs Realism  
A Nuclear Weapons Free World: the Case for a 'Realistic' Idealism**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Views on the feasibility of a nuclear weapons free world often assume that this would be an impossible project. Such a position usually incorporates ideas about the nature of human beings and the role of states (namely that they are self-centred, seeking always their own security and are thus driven by an unending quest for power) and about the ability of international organisations to regulate state behaviour (namely that international organisations are not capable of managing effectively the vital security concerns that affect the globe). Adding to these assumptions about the difficulty of eliminating nuclear weapons are two further considerations: the first is a common view that nuclear weapons cannot be dis-invented and this simple scientific fact therefore dictates that we should not try to do so. The second is a long standing inertia, an acceptance of the status quo where nuclear weapons have been in existence for over six decades and have become part of an unquestioned landscape, where it is easier to do nothing than to try to mould the future in a particular way.

Some of these views about human nature and security fears are closely aligned with what is commonly referred to in International Relations as the theory of realism.

Realism makes the following primary claims: i) that states are the only really effective units or actors in international politics, ii) that we live in what is an 'anarchical system' where there is no global authority or government capable of *enforcing* standards of behaviour on states, and iii) that therefore states must be ever vigilant about protecting themselves against the predatory instincts of others, adopting a position of self help, this self help usually manifesting itself as military preparations against others. Realism also generally claims that there is no place for sentiment, morality or humanitarianism in international politics; rather, states have to act pragmatically, protecting their own interests.<sup>1</sup>

Such views were especially dominant during the Cold War, when US-Soviet ideological claims were mingled with the traditional territorial and security concerns long evident in international politics. The advent of nuclear weaponry only served to reinforce a sense of vulnerability, with the threat of nuclear warfare one of the key elements that spurred others to adopt this same method of defence, a course of action described as a realist response to the security dilemma.<sup>2</sup>

In some contrast to theories of realism, International Relations scholars and practitioners have put forward alternative ways of viewing and explaining the world. They accept that we live in a world where there is no over-arching authority regulating state behaviour, but this is not the end of the argument. They note that

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<sup>1</sup> For discussions of realism see the writings of Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Relations*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1979, and Tim Dunne and Brian Schmidt, 'Realism', in *The Globalization of World Politics*, edited by John Baylis and Steve Smith, Oxford: OUP, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Ken Booth and Nick Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma*, Oxford: OUP, 2008.

human nature is not necessarily selfish, that human societies have witnessed the growth of international norms and laws over time, and that international organisations can go a long way towards managing the worst elements of security fears by constraining the behaviour of states and encouraging cooperative action to serve the common interests of all. This approach, termed complex interdependence and later liberal institutionalism, gained considerable traction even during the Cold War, when it was evident that not only *were* states cooperating in many areas (notably in the transformation of that longstanding battlefield Europe, and also in other areas such as trade) but that there was an undeniable growth in rules and laws that sought to, and often did, limit the actions of states, especially in the area of warfare and human rights. The argument here was that while they were imperfect and far from constituting a world government (something that was not necessarily desirable in any case), organisations like the United Nations, the Council of Europe, or the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, articulated and encouraged certain standards of behaviour that were indeed beginning to change the world, even if these norms were not always upheld by all states.<sup>3</sup>

This view of liberal institutionalism - that humans can cooperate and are engaged in humanitarian concerns, effectively that politics can be *managed* – has come to be seen also as ‘idealism’, in the sense that it conveys a view of a more ideal society. ‘Idealism’ here should not be seen as utopianism, a hankering for something unquestionably unattainable, but rather as a project that challenges dominant

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<sup>3</sup> For writings on complex interdependence and liberal institutionalism see Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Power and Interdependence: the World in Transition*, Little, Brown and Company, 1973.

thinking and argues that we have seen an evolution in the moral behaviour of persons and governments.

This paper contends that such a view of idealism informs current moves towards a nuclear weapons free world. It argues that far from being an impossible goal, achieving a nuclear weapon free world *is* technically and politically possible. This assessment is made on the following three observations: first, that the rise of human rights, international humanitarian law, the actions of civil society and many states demonstrate a clear shift away from realism and toward the idealism of a nuclear weapons free world; second, that realists themselves are beginning to understand that nuclear weapons have little or no utility and that such weapons can act *against* the interests of national and global security; and third, that there has subsequently arisen a view which blends both principles and pragmatism in the project of achieving a world without nuclear weapons. Each of these elements will now be examined in turn.

#### THE RISE OF HUMANITARIAN PERSPECTIVES: CIVIL SOCIETY AND ACTIVE STATES

Realism typically contends that it is states, and states only, which make decisions on foreign policy and security. Yet even prior to the ending of the Cold War, we were seeing the rise of civil society actors; the ending of the bipolar and highly ideological global order in 1989 enabled civil society groups to influence world politics on a scale never seen before. We only need to point to the role that NGOs have played in the land mines ban, the cluster munitions campaign and now the small arms and light weapons campaign to understand how diplomatic and legal processes regarding

security issues, once considered the high politics of the state and not amenable to civil society input, have changed. This is part of a much broader emphasis on human rights that has been growing since 1945, but which has been amplified since the ending of the Cold War.

In this sense, nuclear weapons have come to be increasingly stigmatised by civil society actors as inhumane and contrary to the rules of international humanitarian law. Relying for their effectiveness on the massive loss of life of civilian populations (even if they were targeted at military venues only, which they were often not) and causing suffering beyond imagination, nuclear weapons have been seen as incompatible with current standards of civilisation; their use, many argue, is taboo.<sup>4</sup> Their destructive nature also implies environmental devastation, and inter-generational injustice, in the sense that future generations also are made to suffer the consequences of a nuclear attack, as evidenced by the many birth defects seen in Japan after 1945. Moreover, the growing emphasis on achieving 'human security', which prioritises human rights and calls for attention to the plight of billions of people living in poverty, sees nuclear weapons as wasteful indulgences at a time when the world needs to tackle urgently the problems of global inequality and underdevelopment, climate change, terrorism and other issues of global significance.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007

<sup>5</sup> For a human security perspective on nuclear weapons, see Marianne Hanson, 'Seeking Human Security from Nuclear Weapons' in William Tow, Ramesh Thakur and In Taek Hyun, *Asia's Emerging Regional Order: Reconciling Traditional and Human Security*, Tokyo: UN University Press, 2007.

But it is not only non-state actors who are calling for a nuclear weapons free world. A large number of states, many of them middle powers, have come to support NGOs in this call, and have commissioned studies and reports that examine the nature of nuclear weapons and which call unequivocally for their elimination, and are working to realise a world free of nuclear weapons. What is more, these are mainly western states, many of them firm allies of the United States. They have been concerned about this issue for decades, and have welcomed President Obama's push for the elimination of nuclear weapons. Australia sponsored the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons in 1995 and a newer Commission, the ICNND in 2008, Canada convened a Parliamentary report which strongly advocated nuclear weapons elimination, Japan co-sponsored the Tokyo Forum Report in 1998 (also titled Addressing Nuclear Dangers), Ireland, New Zealand and other states formed the New Agenda Coalition, Sweden was instrumental in keeping this issue alive, via the Blix or WMD Commission, at a time when the Bush Administration was averse to ideas about disarmament, while Norway in 2005 sponsored the Seven Nation Initiative bringing together a number of western and non-western states as well as one of the nuclear weapons states, Britain, into a grouping that is actively researching ways of moving towards zero nuclear weapons.<sup>6</sup>

In all of these studies and other activities, three key elements are present: that any use of nuclear weapons would be catastrophic and would violate human rights in the extreme; that the possession of nuclear weapons by any one state acts as an encouragement to other states to acquire them also; and that it is therefore in the

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<sup>6</sup> For details on the activities of these states see, Marianne Hanson, 'The Advocacy States', in *The Nonproliferation Review*, James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, forthcoming, 2010.

interests of global security to eliminate them. One could not claim that these states are woolly-minded, anti-American, blinkered by ideology or utopian in their efforts. Rather, they understand that the prevention of the further spread of nuclear weapons will require at the very least, a commitment on the part of the existing nuclear weapons states (NWS) that they will eliminate their nuclear arsenals. These actors also understand that while giving up nuclear arsenals on the part of the existing nuclear weapon states will not automatically mean that others will not proliferate, such moves towards elimination is a necessary pre-condition in the move towards global security. In other words, disarmament by the NWS is a necessary, but not sufficient condition in moving towards a nuclear weapon free world.

#### REALISTS' CHANGING VIEWS

Similar understandings of the dangers of proliferation have informed several former realists in their almost surprising call for the elimination of nuclear weapons. While Henry Kissinger, Lord Carver (of the armed forces in the UK) and Lee Butler (former Head of Strategic Command in the US) might be the most obvious of these former 'hawks', they represent a new kind of thinking that concludes that there is little or no utility for weapons, that their presence encourages proliferation and continues to allow the danger of an accidental or sub-state nuclear attack, and that therefore the most logical step to take is to eliminate them. Statements by numerous admirals and generals since 1996 have advocated similar views.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For these statements see, <http://www.ccnr.org/generals.html>

A further factor in the 'conversion' of former realists is the inescapable conclusion that such weapons cannot be used on the battlefield (killing as many friendly forces as foes), are not useful in deterring or responding to biological or chemical weapon attacks or to terrorism. If they serve any purpose at all, it is that they can deter the use of nuclear weapons by others. But even this limited utility is dependent on the continuing existence of nuclear weapons; the elimination of such weapons would do away with this balance of terror. So while it might seem idealistic to imagine the elimination of these weapons, from a strategic and operational point of view, such proposals become far more relevant to the real world and are considered as logical and indeed necessary developments.

None of this, of course, is to underestimate the difficulties involved in such a move or to be sanguine about achieving a consensus on this. Indeed the persons and reports mentioned above call for a balanced, mutual and phased process of elimination, with full verification and monitoring conditions. They also accept that such a move will inevitably take many years. And if convincing the large powers to disarm will be difficult, it might be harder still to persuade authoritarian and/or idiosyncratic regimes elsewhere to do the same. Essential then is the condition that security relations between adversarial states will need to be improved through ongoing engagement, active diplomacy (which might involve rewards), confidence building and other mechanisms.

It is this reconsidering of the place of nuclear weapons that has given rise to the new American push for the elimination of nuclear weapons. What Obama has proposed is

not idealism, in the sense of utopianism, so much as it is an understanding of what it will take to achieve security from nuclear weapons for the US and the wider world. Although he has been criticised as being 'idealistic', a more considered examination of his ambition reveals it to reflect widespread popular sentiment, and a clear understanding that only by subscribing to the idea of zero nuclear weapons, and working towards this, can he build a global consensus against any state which is defiant against what would become an increasingly important global norm. With the existing nuclear weapon states committed to dismantling their arsenals, there is likely to be far more concerted and widespread pressure on the Irans and North Korea of this world to comply with prescribed behaviour. By building a global coalition against such proliferators and eliminating the moral high ground that they resort to – ie., that they will not comply with the call for disarmament because the NWS have not done so – Obama increases the chances of combating proliferation. Again, the caveats noted above apply here; a move by the nuclear weapon states does not mean that defiant behaviour will be overcome, but it is a significant step in the right direction.

It is also worth noting that a perennial fear of many realists is that nuclear weapons must be retained in case they are needed to respond to proliferation in the future (what is termed 'breakout'). The counter-argument here however is that any act of breakout in a world of zero nuclear weapons can be met with the force of a global resistance, involving if needed a conventional weapon capability. Thus even retaining nuclear weapons out of fear that others might cheat does not stand up easily to scrutiny; conventional weapons capabilities are far more likely to be used in any such

eventuality, thus depriving nuclear weapons of even this utility. This strategic calculation is certainly part of the reasoning behind the conversion of former hawks towards a nuclear weapon free world.

#### BLENDING PRINCIPLES AND PRAGMATISM: SERVING NATIONAL AND GLOBAL INTERESTS

As has been noted above, realism has typically not been associated with morality or principled behaviour. Rather, it focuses on interests, and stipulates that a state will, and should, only act in its own national interest. Realism claims that it is pragmatism, and not principles, that dictate the decisions of policy makers. But what is increasingly clear in international politics is that acting in a principled way – in this case to eliminate what are seen as inhumane weapons – can also have a pragmatic benefit. Practitioners have been forced to accept that it is at least sometimes necessary to take principles and morality into consideration, whether this is in terms of alleviating poverty, responding to climate change, or in eliminating nuclear weapons, when searching for optimum solutions at a national and international level. Former Australian Foreign Minister, and now Co-Chair of the International Commission on Nuclear Nonproliferation and Disarmament, Gareth Evans, has made this point several times, and as early as the 1990s when he noted that Australia could act as a ‘good international citizen’, combining both principles *and* pragmatism in its policies. It was, for instance, in Australia’s national interest that nuclear proliferation be halted and reversed, which in turn required encouraging the nuclear weapon states to disarm. Acting as a good international citizen did not require a state to forsake its national interests; instead, what was becoming clear was that

states were increasingly facing *common* interests, and that security could not be gained against others, but rather with others. If, for example, Australia was not to face proliferation on its doorstep, and increasing anger from the smaller or non-western states at the continuing possession of nuclear weapons by a select group of states, then it needed to act to encourage a global norm of non-proliferation and disarmament.

In this sense then, we might argue that what is being pursued is neither realism nor an impossible utopianism, but instead a calculated view of what 'the ideal' is in terms of state, regional and global security. It can be termed a 'pragmatic idealism', a search for a global order which is recognised as being inherently difficult but worth pursuing for the very reason that it lowers or eliminates the risk of global catastrophe. As Evans and others have noted, pursuing these aims is a moral good in itself; it also enhances global security.

## CONCLUSION

No doubt there will remain scepticism about moving to a nuclear weapons free world. And it must be reiterated here that an idealist view of this project - this paper's idealist view of this project - is firmly rooted in an understanding of the many difficulties involved. At the same time, idealism incorporates the view that as humans, we have the necessary abilities and free will to shape our future, rather than passively accepting the nuclear status quo and the dangers that this brings. Human agency is crucial to idealism, as without it, changes cannot be articulated and actioned. Even in times where change is hard to achieve, key persons and events –

such as Obama's chairing of the UN Security Council's special session on nuclear weapons in September 2009 – can make a vital difference in shifting the paradigm.

Yet it remains very hard for some to change long-held views of the world in terms of nuclear weapons. But for those who argue that nuclear weapons cannot be dis-invented, it is worth remembering that active human efforts over the decades have succeeded in proscribing a range of human behaviours. In many ways, it is not the invention of the weapon that is the issue; it is, rather, how we *manage* this weapon, how we choose to let it determine human futures. Just as chemical and biological weapons cannot be dis-invented, and just as the gas chambers of World War II cannot be dis-invented, we can nevertheless take concerted action to reinforce norms and rules against the use of such weapons and such barbarity. Speaking at an abstract level, while the genie might be 'out of the bottle', it needs to be remembered that the genie was a servant and was always subject to its master. We can see ourselves and our global institutions – including the United Nations, civil society actors and humanitarians - as constituting such a master.

One writer has expressed well this need for humans to take control of the dangers in this world. Tony Curzon-Price argues that it is necessary to 'reclaim realism for idealists'. Noting that a 'good world' is possible, he argues that 'the claims of immutable forces of human nature, economics or the reality of power need to be

shown up for the self-serving myths that they are'.<sup>8</sup> While acknowledging that it is difficult to change the world, he nevertheless argues that,

'Realism should not be left to cynics, neo-conservatives and market fundamentalists. We need to have a clear, honest and courageous picture of reality; but it must also be plural, respectful and humanist.'<sup>9</sup>

An understanding of reality based on close examination, on valuing human life and global security - what we might call 'courageous realism' or 'realistic idealism' - can be used in the service of an ideal, in this case, a world free from the threat of nuclear annihilation.

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<sup>8</sup> Tony Curzon-Price, 'Reclaiming realism for idealists', OpenDemocracy, 9 November 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.