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**Mr. Francois de Soete graduated Summa Cum Laude from Arizona State University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in History and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science. He is working on a Master of Arts degree in Political Science at the University of British Columbia. Currently writing a Master's thesis that seeks to develop a conceptual understanding of police power in North America. Other research interests, however, pertain to international security, with particular attention to Nuclear Non-Proliferation. On account**

**of this latter interest, represented Arizona State University at SCUSA (Student Council of the United States of America) held annually at the United States Military Academy, at WestPoint, New York, working on the “Russia and FSU” committee. This committee prepared a presentation on the threat posed by the deteriorating nuclear facilities in Russia. For this year’s Conference of Defence Associations Institute Annual Graduate Student Symposium at the Royal Military College of Canada, presenting a paper on nuclear non-proliferation, focusing on the**

# **contrast between realist and neo-liberalist arguments as explanations for the success of the nuclear non-proliferation regime.**

## **Abstract**

The threat of nuclear expansion is a growing concern amidst claims by North Korea of nuclear development and the United States' allegations of nuclear weapons in Iraq. As such, this paper will focus on the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the cornerstone of the nuclear weapons non-proliferation regime. After thirty years since its inception, very few states have violated the treaty. The NPT's design and effectiveness, then, will be evaluated with reference to the two international relations theories, the age-tested theory of realism and the newly emergent neo-liberal institutional theory. Ultimately, neo-liberal institutionalism clearly warrants consideration as a valid interpretation given the miniscule number of nuclear states in the world today. It is clear that, as Neo-liberals like Robert Keohane argue, mutual self-interests can in fact lead to cooperation. Nevertheless, despite the success of the NPT, the details involved behind its success suggest that a realist interpretation, like that articulated by John Mearsheimer, may in fact be more accurate. After carefully examining details behind the NPT's success, and the current developments in the international arena that may challenge its viability, it may soon be revealed to the world today that realism does in fact still govern the international arena.

**The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime:**

**Trying to Maintain the Status Quo**

The year is 416 BCE and the entire Hellenic world is engulfed in the Peloponnesian War, a war that pits the two superpowers against one another: the Spartan-led Lacedaemonian league against the Athenian empire. A small island state named Melos has, however, attempted to maintain its neutrality. But, the Athenian Empire refuses to respect Melos' neutrality and instead dispatched representatives to offer the Melians an ultimatum:

If you are meeting with us for any reason other than to discuss the survival of your city, [by surrendering and joining our alliance], then we have nothing further to discuss ... for in human considerations justice is a matter between equals in power, for the strong do what they can, while the weak suffer what they must.<sup>[1]</sup>

Despite the Athenians' threat, the Melians chose to maintain their neutrality, and with that decision ... the fate of Melos was sealed. The Athenians laid siege to the city, killing every adult male and selling the rest into slavery upon breaking through the city walls.

This account, written by the Greek historian Thucydides, illustrates the birth of realism in international relations theory, for it articulates the fundamental realist principle—the international realm is anarchy, where there is no central power to protect states. Today, there is intense debate regarding the validity of realist interpretation in international relations analysis. Much of the debate is centered around the effects of nuclear weapons on the international order. Only eight countries possess nuclear weapons after fifty years of nuclear development. As T.V. Paul writes, “states therefore perceive the need to be prepared and to deter any possible attacks by acquiring armaments ... countries in such a self-help system would not ordinarily forgo nuclear weapons.”<sup>[2]</sup> This leads one to ask: how can this be reconciled with realist theory, which might predict a far greater number of states with a nuclear weapons arsenal? Neo-liberal institutionalism puts forth an answer, which strongly challenges realist international relations theory.

Neo-liberals suggest that mutual self-interests can generate cooperation in the international arena by means of international institutions. This paper will focus on the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the cornerstone of the nuclear weapons non-proliferation regime. After thirty years since its inception, very few states have violated the treaty. The NPT's design and effectiveness, then, will be evaluated with reference to the two international relations theories introduced previously, realism and neo-liberal institutionalism. Ultimately, neo-liberal institutionalism clearly warrants consideration as a valid interpretation given the miniscule number of nuclear states. It is clear that as Neo-liberals argue, mutual self-interests can lead to cooperation. Nevertheless, despite the success of the NPT, the details involved behind its success suggest that a realist interpretation may in fact be more accurate. Without examining these details, it may soon be revealed to the world today, as it was to the Melians over two millennia ago, that realism does in fact still govern the international arena.

## Realism and Neo-liberal Institutionalism

Neo-liberal institutionalists argue that cooperation is in fact possible in international politics. Although neo-liberal institutionalists accept several liberal principles, neo-liberals also accept several core principles put forth by realists. First among these is the acknowledgment that the international political arena is a realm of anarchy.<sup>[3]</sup> In this anarchical condition, there is no central authority to enforce agreements between states, and there is no central authority to protect states from encroachment by other states. As such, states are atomistic and act according to their own self-interests.

Despite this state of anarchy and states' self-interested motivations, neo-liberals argue that this does not preclude cooperation.<sup>[4]</sup> As Robert Keohane writes,

The neo-liberal institutionalist perspective ... is relevant to an international system only if the actors have some mutual interests; that is, they must potentially gain from their cooperation.<sup>[5]</sup>

Thus, neo-liberals argue that self-interests can in fact generate cooperation. If multiple actors have mutual self-interests, such as peace to note just one example, then this mutual self-interest can lead to the creation of norms and institutions—such as arms control regimes.

Neo-liberals suggest that international institutions do not necessarily enforce rules established by international agreements, but instead, institutions serve primarily as a means to reduce transaction costs, provide information to the states involved, and create norms that can significantly pressure states to not defect.<sup>[6]</sup> Furthermore, neo-liberal institutionalists argue that institutions can help states change their perceptions of self-interest. According to this view, then, states are first and foremost concerned with absolute gains, and as such, the major obstruction to cooperation, according to neo-liberals, is the problem of cheating.

Realists, by contrast, do not view states as merely atomistic and unitary actors. Instead, states are considered defensively positional actors. Realists contend that survival is the primary interest of states. Consequently, states are more concerned with relative gains.<sup>[7]</sup> As John Mearsheimer suggests, states are sensitive to effects on their relative positions vis-à-vis other states when presented with opportunities for cooperation.<sup>[8]</sup> A state that defects from an agreement will attain significant relative gains. More importantly, though, even if states do not violate the terms of an agreement, one state may benefit more than the other in relative terms.<sup>[9]</sup>

States will vary in their concern over gaps in relative gains depending on what Joseph Grieco has termed a state's "level of  $k$ ," whereby  $k$  represents the coefficient of a state's sensitivity to relative gains by other states.<sup>[10]</sup> Factors that influence the value of  $k$  include the area of cooperation, where issues involving security will always make states far more wary of

cooperation than in other issues like environmental concerns.<sup>[11]</sup> As an extension of this type of concern, states will also express great apprehension over perceived fungibility, where the area of benefit can be translated into advantages in other areas (i.e. economic benefits being relayed into military advantages). Also, whether the partner with whom a state is cooperating is a long-term ally or a continual nemesis will influence the level of k.<sup>[12]</sup> Clearly, then, realists are quite skeptical regarding international cooperation.

The issue in question for this analysis, then, is whether or not a nuclear non-proliferation regime can be successful in international relations. More precisely, which theory is better supported in light of the nuclear non-proliferation regime: realism or neo-liberal institutionalism?

### **Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime**

The nuclear arms control regime is comprised of numerous treaties, which can be broken down into two groups. The first group consists of treaties between the United States and the former Soviet Union limiting the size of each country's nuclear arsenal. These treaties include the Anti-ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START).<sup>[13]</sup> The second group consists of treaties aimed at limiting nuclear weapons development by all countries, the most notable of these treaties being the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT).<sup>[14]</sup> The latter of the two treaties from this second group is by far the most significant treaty today in the arms control regime due to high levels of adherence and the sweeping nature of the articles written in the treaty.

The NPT is comprised of ten articles, which in totality aim to reduce not only the spread of nuclear weapons, but also to eliminate the possibility of nuclear war.<sup>[15]</sup> The basic logic behind the NPT is articulated in the treaty's preamble, which states:

... considering the devastation that would be visited upon all mankind by nuclear war and the consequent need to make every effort to avert the danger of such a war and to take measures to safeguard the security of peoples accordingly ... the proliferation of nuclear weapons would seriously enhance the danger of nuclear war.<sup>[16]</sup>

The first and second articles of the treaty aim to prevent horizontal nuclear weapons proliferation by prohibiting nuclear states from providing non-nuclear states with the technological or material means for developing nuclear weapons, and prohibits non-nuclear states from attempting to acquire or develop nuclear weapons.<sup>[17]</sup> The treaty also provides measures for verification under article III, by subjecting the signatories to inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).<sup>[18]</sup> Under article IV, however, the treaty does allow states to pursue nuclear energy programs for peaceful means, such as nuclear energy for civilian use. In addition to horizontal nonproliferation, the treaty also attempts to provide

vertical non-proliferation as well under article VI, which stipulates that nuclear weapons states will eventually move to reduce their own nuclear stockpiles.<sup>[19]</sup> Finally, Article X extends the treaty indefinitely, with the NPT having been made permanent in 1995 at the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review and Extension Conference (NPTREC).

The success of this treaty is remarkable, acquiring over 185 signatories since its inception in 1968. Aside from acquiring numerous signatories, the treaty boasts the acquisition of several states that were genuine nuclear threats in not only their ability to produce nuclear devices, but also in having a real desire for nuclear weapons. The most prominent cases include Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and South Africa, with the latter agreeing to dismantle its seven nuclear devices.<sup>[20]</sup> In addition, largely made possible as a result of the NPT, nuclear-weapons-free zones (NWFZs) now cover the entire southern hemisphere.<sup>[21]</sup>

Despite such success, the NPT has also experienced some failures as well. There are two prominent cases of noncompliance: Iraq and North Korea.<sup>[22]</sup> There are also three prominent states that refuse to sign the NPT: India, Pakistan, and Israel.<sup>[23]</sup> In addition to noncompliance, there are doubts about its ability to monitor compliance. The main problem lies in the fact that approximately 85% of the IAEA's monitoring budget is spent monitoring nations who pose no genuine proliferation threat. Approximately 35% of the IAEA's budget is spent monitoring Japan, while another 25% is spent on Germany.<sup>[24]</sup> The IAEA spends approximately 10% of its safeguards budget on Canada, with another 10% being devoted to monitoring France, China, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.<sup>[25]</sup> Finally, another 7% is spent on Belgium, Sweden, Spain, Czech Republic, and Slovakia. This means that only 15% of the budget is allocated for all of the remaining states, which includes the problem states like Iraq and North Korea.

The current breakdown in funds used for monitoring poses a significant problem to the effectiveness of the NPT's enforcement, for as Allan Krass writes,

Most people would happily trade ten years of routine monitoring of Canada's nuclear fuel inventories for just one day at the two North Korean waste sites, but the prospects for shifting resources to states of more serious proliferation concern do not seem promising ... [for] any formula that included political factors in weighing diversion risks would almost certainly be unacceptable to non-nuclear weapon state parties.<sup>[26]</sup>

Nowhere was this failure more prominent than in the case of Iraq. Iraq was in fact a signatory of the NPT, but it was discovered during the Gulf War that the Iraqi nuclear weapons program had successfully escaped detection by the IAEA inspections.<sup>[27]</sup> Were it not for the allied military campaign against Iraq in 1991, Iraq would have probably been able to develop nuclear weapons.<sup>[28]</sup> Clearly, then, the current system of monitoring by the IAEA cannot provide sufficient assurance that states are in fact complying. Many states comply because they have

no ability to produce nuclear weapons, or because they have no interest in developing them.<sup>[29]</sup> The NPT is not adequately supported, given these deficiencies in the monitoring of states that do pose a significant threat.

In addition to these limitations of the treaty, there is the highly notable failure regarding India and Pakistan. Both India and Pakistan conducted successful tests of nuclear weapons in 1998. For India, there were concerns over the military cooperation between Pakistan and China. In addition, India's ambitions as a regional power led it to conduct its nuclear tests and get recognition as a nuclear weapons state.<sup>[30]</sup> In Pakistan's case, military concerns regarding India's capabilities led the Pakistani government to undertake a program of nuclear testing to assure that it could match India's nuclear capabilities.<sup>[31]</sup> According to the findings of the UNIDIR Conference in 1998, nuclear war is now a genuine possibility as a result of the nuclear capabilities of both states and the ongoing tensions over Kashmir.<sup>[32]</sup>

After Pakistan's nuclear development, it too quickly joined a list of states that employed what United States Senator John Glenn of Ohio called the strategy of "Give us aid ... or we'll proliferate."<sup>[33]</sup> Several states have demonstrated that the ability to develop nuclear weapons can serve as a means to receive foreign aid and monetary compensations. Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, and even more notably North Korea, have all employed this strategy, which essentially results in the paying off of countries to remain nuclear weapons free.<sup>[34]</sup> This naturally leads one to ask the question: who will be next? For there are after all numerous states in desperate need of foreign aid, though not yet capable of developing nuclear weapons.

In addition, various future developments may challenge the effectiveness of the nonproliferation regime. One possible future development that could have an impact on the NPT is the Europeanization of France's nuclear forces.<sup>[35]</sup> France and Germany have developed a bilateral security agreement, the Common Franco-German Security and Defense Concept.<sup>[36]</sup> This has increased the prospects of the European Union (EU) implementing nuclear deterrence as a European policy, rather than a unilateral French nuclear deterrence strategy.<sup>[37]</sup> This would of course mean an increase in nuclear weapons states. Clearly, then, the NPT has faced numerous challenges, and it appears that many more may lie ahead.

## **Analysis**

The Non-Proliferation Treaty must be credited as a relatively successful endeavor thus far. After all, the number of nuclear weapons states is significantly smaller than experts had predicted in the 1960's prior to the NPT's inception, when the Kennedy administration predicted the existence of 20 nuclear weapons states by 1980.<sup>[38]</sup> As John Gerard Ruggie argues, "Indeed, in recent years more countries have left the list of problem cases—including Argentina, Brazil and South Africa—than have joined it."<sup>[39]</sup> Such cooperation is made possible, according to Robert Keohane and Lisa Martin, because institutions provide for easier

data exchanges, make agreements more trustworthy, and treaties also include inspections guidelines to prevent non-compliance.[\[40\]](#)

But despite the nuclear non-proliferation regime's relative success, the realist interpretation is more appropriate for several reasons. To begin with, the very existence of the NPT is best explained by a realist interpretation, which suggests that institutions, including the non-proliferation regime, are in fact just a reflection of the balance of power. Essentially, realists argue that treaties are a formalization of the balance of power, but at the same time these international regimes are no more durable than the balance of power that they are initially based on.[\[41\]](#) The NPT is a reflection of the 1975 balance of power: its very framework preserves the nuclear capabilities of the five nuclear states at that time, while limiting other states from developing nuclear capabilities. Consequently, as John Mearsheimer points out, international institutions like the non-proliferation regime "are basically a reflection of the distribution of power in the world. They are based on self-interested calculations of the great powers...."[\[42\]](#)

Neo-liberals would of course contend that the inception of the NPT was in the interest of most states, not just the great powers, and as such, cooperation was made possible. This, however, discounts the fact that most states fell under the nuclear umbrellas of the United States or Soviet Union at the time.[\[43\]](#) As such, numerous states had no competing interests since many lacked the ability to develop nuclear weapons, and states that could develop nuclear weapons found no need to do so, due to the assurances of the competing superpowers. Therefore, continuing developments in the post-cold war era will inevitably lead some states to reconsider their security interests.

The case of India and Pakistan in 1998 is perhaps the best illustration of this situation, as the standoff between these two states illustrates the realist point that states are defensively positional. Given that there is no central power to protect states, each individual state is responsible for its own survival. Thus, the developments in India, Pakistan, and Israel, demonstrate that in a region with the possibility for significant conflict, and where states have the ability to develop nuclear weapons, they will try to do so.[\[44\]](#) For such countries, Joseph Grieco's "k" factor is significantly high and consequently, cooperation is too risky.

Additionally, several states have already found the pursuit of nuclear weapons as a security policy in their self-interest from a financial standpoint. As more states reach the threshold of nuclear capabilities, one must wonder how financially capable the United States and the other western powers will be to provide foreign aid to these developing states. The few cases of noncompliance serve as a powerful reminder that self-interests can change radically and as such, cooperation based on *mutual* self-interests is quite fragile. As Fred Iklé, former director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA), pointed out:

A potential violator of an arms-control agreement will not be deterred simply

by the risk that his action may be discovered. What will deter him will be the fear that what he gains from the violation will be outweighed by the loss he may suffer from the victims reaction to it.[\[45\]](#)

The cases of Iraq and North Korea validate this argument, for each stood to gain more through noncompliance. Iraq chose to violate its commitment to the NPT and had to be disarmed by force. North Korea continually threatens to resume its nuclear weapons program to receive foreign aid. As these examples demonstrate, states will break the agreement when it is in their interests to do so. As more developing states approach nuclear capabilities, more and more may choose to violate the NPT as it will be in their self-interest to do so. As more states advance technologically and/or as regional circumstances change, more states may actually proceed to develop nuclear weapons.

## Conclusion

The nuclear non-proliferation regime has been remarkably successful given that only three additional nuclear weapons states have emerged since the NPT took effect. As such, cooperation is clearly possible, as neo-liberals argue, when states share mutual self-interests. Despite this apparent success, however, a realist interpretation is nonetheless more appropriate when evaluating the nuclear non-proliferation regime. The very design of the Non-Proliferation Treaty is reflective of the realist premise that institutions are a reflection of the balance of power. In addition, states have proven that if the gains from violating the treaty outweigh the costs, they may choose to forego compliance, as has been the case with Iraq and North Korea. In other instances, some states have been bribed into compliance, where in the absence of being granted foreign aid, they would have pursued the development of nuclear weapons.

Quite simply, the NPT is in fact a reflection of the current state of affairs in the international arena, and as the relative power of the west wanes and tensions rise in various regions of the world, the NPT will face numerous challenges. Some developing states will eventually acquire the technological capabilities to produce nuclear weapons and as regional circumstances change, these states may actually proceed to develop nuclear weapons. Only after numerous additional states acquire the reasonable means to develop or acquire nuclear weapons will it be possible to validate a neo-liberal interpretation of the NPT's success, for compliance is a non-issue when the subjects in question do not have the means to violate the treaty.

As the twenty-first century progresses, the NPT will be faced with significant threats to its strength as an international regime, for numerous other uncertainties lie ahead. For example, the North Korean case remains unresolved, and a resolution to the India/Pakistan tensions is still absent as well. Or perhaps, the discovery of another state's nuclear weapons program escaping IAEA detection as Iraq's program did, and the subsequent

response by the violating state's neighbors. Another possibility is a potential rift between Europe and the United States. In addition, changes in leadership in influential countries could significantly affect the effectiveness of the NPT. Any of these scenarios could pose serious challenges to the nuclear non-proliferation regime. In sum, then, realist analysis of the NPT is more valid than the neo-liberal interpretation, and as such, the non-proliferation regime should not be viewed with anything more than cautious optimism. For despite the pleasant dreams neo-liberal institutionalist interpretations present, the future could quickly lead the world to awaken in a realist nightmare.

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