

Why South Africa Dismantled Its Nuclear Weapons

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Abstract: *This article analyzes the nuclear disarmament of South Africa through neorealist, liberal, and constructivist lenses in order to determine which theory most accurately describes why South Africa ended their nuclear weapons program. It argues that constructivist theory best explains the end of South Africa's nuclear program because of its ability to explain how domestic decision making affects how the state interacts in the international system. Under President De Klerk, South Africa became the first and only state to give up its nuclear arsenal without international pressure to do so. According to neorealists, South Africa pursued disarmament in order to form stronger alliances. Under liberal theory, South Africa pursued disarmament due to the democratic and economic developments the state underwent in the 1990s with the end of apartheid. The nuclear program proved to be a huge burden on the economy and therefore had no place in the post-apartheid South African society. Finally, constructivist theory argues that nuclear disarmament occurred because of the prevailing desire in South African society to identify as a Western state. To pursue this identity would mean giving up nuclear weapons to appeal to Western states, and in turn South Africa would be given the opportunity to join Western collective security organizations.*

We must ask the question, which might sound naïve to those who have elaborated sophisticated arguments to justify their refusal to eliminate these terrible and terrifying weapons of mass destruction—why do they need them anyway!

(Address of Nelson Mandela at the 53rd UN General Assembly, New York, 21 September 1998)

Introduction

The then-president of South Africa, Frederik de Klerk announced in his speech to the Parliament on 24 March 1993 that “at one stage South Africa did develop a limited nuclear deterrent” but that in 1989 his government had decided to end the program and ordered in 1990 to dismantle and destroy all of the nuclear devices (Myre, par. 14, 19). This made South Africa the first country in the world to give up its nuclear program voluntarily.

This paper will give neorealist, liberal and constructivist explanations of why South Africa dismantled its nuclear program. I will start by briefly explaining the historical facts of the case. I will then argue that from the realist perspective the reason for dismantling the program was to increase South Africa's power and to allow for better alliances. Liberals would argue that the program was ended because the country democratized and liberalized its market, and constructivists would say that the dismantling happened because the dominant identity in the society wanted to appeal to the Western countries. I will close by arguing that the constructivists' theory provides the most focus on detail and thus is most accurate in explaining each individual case study.

Background

In order to understand fully why South Africa dismantled its nuclear weapons, it is necessary to examine first the history of its nuclear weapons development. J. W. De Villiers, Roger Jardine and Mitchell Reiss write in their 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article “Why South Africa Gave Up The Bomb” that South Africa initially started its nuclear program after World War II when its abundant uranium resources were desired by the United States and Britain. The winners of the war needed to sustain their existing nuclear programs and bought South Africa’s uranium through the Combined Development Agency to do so.

De Villiers et al. then say that by the end of the 1950s, South Africa decided to use some of its resources to build a nuclear program of their own. This program was proposed for peaceful purposes only (Ibid., 99). By 1969 South Africa already experienced considerable technological success which inspired the government to build a pilot uranium enrichment plant, named the Y-plant, outside Pretoria (Ibid., 99). In 1971 the government approved preliminary nuclear explosives research and three years later authorized nuclear explosive capability, still for peaceful purposes. Despite protests from the Soviet Union and the United States, who had discovered the South African nuclear site, the first bomb was built by 1979. Inspired by these developments, the government ordered six more nuclear devices to be built. (Ibid. 100)

In his famous speech to the parliament in 1993, de Klerk explained the program to develop limited deterrent nuclear military capability was adopted in 1974 to protect against the Soviet expansionist threat in southern Africa as well as prevailing uncertainty concerning the designs of the Warsaw Pact members. The buildup of the Cuban forces in Angola from 1975 onwards reinforced the perception that a deterrent was necessary—as did South Africa’s relative international isolation and the fact that it could not rely on outside assistance, should it be attacked (Collings, par. 2-3).

These threats were considerably diminished and the nuclear deterrent became superfluous after the Soviet Union collapsed, Namibia gained independence, Angola became more peaceful and Cuba withdrew its 50,000 troops from South Africa (de Villiers et al., 102). The change in the security situation was also argued by Frederik de Klerk in 1993 to be one of the main reasons for concluding the program (Myre).

By the time of de Klerk, who is mostly known for ending the apartheid regime in South Africa, assumed the presidential office in 1989, six bombs had already been assembled and the seventh was in the process of development. He revised the nuclear program and in 1990, determined to terminate it (de Villiers et al.). The Y-plant was closed by 1 February 1990, and the weapons were assembled between July 1990 and July 1991 (Lieberman, 74). On 10 July 1991 South Africa also signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty and formed a safeguard agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency in September 1991 (De Villiers et al. 104), an expression of the strong commitment South Africa had to its new policy.

Realism

Building on this timeline of South Africa’s nuclear program, we can proceed to examine the reasons for dismantling it. I will start with the realist interpretation, as it was the first

international relations theory. It is necessary to mention that realism is internally very diverse and various authors have differing and often conflicting explanations for events. The structural constraints of this paper do not allow me to analyze all of the existing viewpoints, so I have chosen the ones that I feel are most useful in explaining in South Africa.

Despite the differences among realist authors, they all discuss international relations in terms of power because “power is always the immediate aim” (Morgenthau, 27) of states’ foreign policy. There is considerable debate among realist about the definition of power and its long-term goals, though. The main developer structural realism, Kenneth Waltz argues that power is defined in terms of a state’s capability to achieve its goals (Waltz, 93). Hans Morgenthau, the founder of modern realist theory of international relations, more broadly reasons that power can be military, political, economic, etc. in nature, but its function is always to serve the national interests of a state by giving the exerciser of power control over the actions of those who are subject to power (Morgenthau, 27-29). Waltz sees the states as having a more specified goal than mere influence. For him, states, at a minimum, desire to guarantee their preservation and, at a maximum, gain universal domination (Waltz, 117). He argues that to reach those goals, states use either internal means like increasing economic capability and military strength, or external means like strengthening their alliances and weakening opposing ones (Ibid.).

One argument both Waltz and Morgenthau would agree with is that power-seeking behavior will result in a balance of power wherein having more power is better than having less (Waltz, 117). Therefore, according to the survival-domination approach and Morgenthau’s view that a perfectly virtuous state always weighs the consequences of its alternative political options when seeking power (prudence) (Morgenthau, 10), South Africa stopped its nuclear program in order to improve its position on the preservation-domination scale and to increase its dominance in the region and internationally through economic power and alliances rather than through military means.

Kenneth Waltz wrote that defense spending “is unproductive for all and unavoidable for most” (104) but as we can see, South Africa serves as an example of a state where it was not unavoidable to reduce spending significantly while not giving away power. At the time of implementation, South Africa’s nuclear program cost 750 million rand, which was less than 0.5 percent of the country’s defense budget (De Villiers, et al., 102). From the late 1970s through the 1980s, South Africa’s annual military budgets were between 2 and 4.5 billion rand (4 and 5 percent of gross national product). Despite being expensive, the program was still easily affordable for the government (Liberman, 55). There was only a remote threat to South Africa of invasion or nuclear blackmail throughout the development of the nuclear devices (Ibid., 58). The threat reduced even more at the end of the 1980s after the Soviet Union collapsed and Angola became more peaceful. The nuclear weapons then quickly became an excessive strain on South Africa’s resources.

A great number of the newspaper articles and interviews that were published after de Klerk’s speech in 1993, pointed out the president’s comment that “a nuclear deterrent had become not only superfluous, but in fact, an obstacle to the development of South Africa’s international relations” (as cited in Myre par. 18). The government was especially worried about the relations with other African nations (De Villiers et al., 102-103). The only realistic threats

were the Angolan and Namibian rebel forces, though, and the “utility of nuclear weapons for meeting these threats, even if they materialized, was borderline considering the diplomatic and security risks as well as the budgetary costs involved” (Lieberman, 58).

All things considered, the cost-benefit calculus demonstrated to the government that South Africa needed political rather than military means of increasing power. The nuclear deterrent and the strategic ambiguity of the country were more of a burden than a benefit (De Villiers, et al., 103). A realist like Morgenthau would say that terminating the nuclear program in these circumstances was good foreign policy because that kind of “rational foreign policy minimizes risks and maximizes benefits and, hence, complies both with the moral precept of prudence and the political requirement of success” (Morgenthau, 8). South Africa improved its economic power by becoming more efficient and its political power by having good relations with countries in Africa and the West that it needed to cooperate with.

At this point it is important to acknowledge that there also exists a significantly different school of thought in realism. To be precise, realists like Scott D. Sagan argue that economic considerations cannot justify complete nuclear disarmament. Nuclear disarmament is not a viable or smart policy option because small decisions (i.e. decisions by any one state to enact a disarmament program) are unstable. There will always be at least one state that will “cheat” and try to develop nuclear capability in a crisis situation. This selfish behavior of states will eventually increase the likelihood that nuclear weapons will actually be used (Sagan, 86). Disarmament would make a state vulnerable to attacks by more powerful states (Ibid., 87). From this perspective, South Africa made a mistake by dismantling its nuclear weapons because it increased its vulnerability. However, as there is not sufficient evidence to prove that South Africa actually became more insecure and exposed to any realistic threats, I have not accepted it as an explanatory instrument in my analysis.

Liberalism

The power-centered discourse is not the only way of explaining why South Africa dismantled its nuclear weapons. The liberal theory, well-exemplified in Michael Mandelbaum’s “The Ideas that Conquered the World: Peace, Democracy, and Free Markets in the Twenty-First Century,” advises to examine the structure of the society, the economic system of the country and whether the state is at peace or not (1). Mandelbaum argues that democratic order, free markets and peaceful relationships between countries increase the human happiness and therefore the preferable foundation for any country’s policies (Ibid., 402). According to this logic, liberals would say that South Africa’s nuclear disarmament followed from democratization and market liberalization that together lead to desiring more peaceful relationships with other countries.

The idea that democratic countries rarely fight each other in wars is the underlying assumption of the liberal democratic peace theory presented by Mandelbaum (243). The theory argues that we can assume that democratic societies can reach compromises and manage differences or conflicts without the use of violence; force is used only for defensive purposes (Mandelbaum, 250-1). Therefore, the development of South Africa’s nuclear program is explicable through the changes in the social order. The apartheid government was not democratic

and did not follow the principle of defensive armament, which led to the establishment of the nuclear program. After the threat from the Soviet Union, Angola and other countries decreased, and as the nation became more democratic, the country became more prone to reaching compromise without the use of military force. The nuclear weapons were not usable anymore and destroying them was the most logical option.

Another key feature of the democratic peace theory is transparency. That means that each country knows which arms the others have, what they used them for and when they plan to use them (Mandelbaum, 114). Neoliberals like Robert Keohane argue that demands for accountability and transparency have increased the discovery and development of important resources and issues in the modern globalizing society (Keohane et al., 18). For liberals, transparency is best pursued through institutions (Mandelbaum, 115) like the Non-Proliferation Treaty that South Africa signed. Mandelbaum argues that complying with the standards of the Treaty enables countries like South Africa to get the benefits of nuclear abstinence by guaranteeing to others that they are committed to their decisions (Ibid., 215). Transparency was clearly one of the main reasons president de Klerk revealed the nuclear program to the parliament and to the international community in 1993. In his speech he said that he truly believed that the voluntary termination of the nuclear weapons program and revelation of all information concerning it would reinforce the government's commitment to assuring transparency (Collings, par. 30).

Liberals further say that the emergence of free markets was another contributing factor for dismantling the nuclear weapons in South Africa. The liberal theory reasons that even though "a market economy is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for democratic politics" it still improves democracy and will ultimately lead to peace (Mandelbaum, 266-8). Marina Ottaway explains in "South Africa: A Struggle for a New Order" that South Africa liberated its economy in the 1990s because "there was a growing consensus that it was the economic kingdom that counted most, not as something to be conquered by politicians but as something to be left to follow its own rules and logic, free of political interference" (192-3). It was thought that politicians ought to develop democracy and "the free market would do the rest" (Ibid., 193). By acting on that demand the government created conditions for democracy and peace which also meant dismantling the nuclear weapons.

Constructivism

Constructivists contest the assumptions liberals and realists make about the workings of the international system. Alexander Wendt, the founder of the constructivist theory states in "Social Theory of International Politics" that the constructivist should expect the agents and structures to engage in a relationship of co-determination (94). He argues against taking agents and structures as separate like realists and liberals do and challenges students of international relations to look at "the ways in which state identities rather than just behavior are affected by the international system, and the ways in which those identities are constituted rather than just caused by the system" (Ibid., 21). Therefore, according to the constructivist theory, South Africa dismantled its nuclear program because of a desire to pursue an identity as a Western country.

In one of his earlier articles, Wendt defines identity as a “relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self” (1992, 397). Ted Hopf from Ohio State University further explains that we all live in certain social cognitive structures and participate in several discourses which constitute the social practices and identities of us and Others (Hopf, 3-4). In his opinion, foreign policy decision makers are incorporated into the social cognitive structures that embrace the identities and discourses and these very identities constitute how the decision makers understand themselves and make decisions (Ibid., 20). It is also important to note that each society consists of several competing identities that mutually shape each other but that there is usually one that is dominant and ultimately determines the foreign policy of that state (Ibid., 1).

In the case of South Africa, the identity of the white minority government was dominant and was the one that affected the country’s policies. William J. Long and Suzette R. Grillot explain that dominant South African identity in their article “Ideas, Beliefs, and Nuclear Policies: The Cases of South Africa and Ukraine.” The white leaders of South Africa identified the country as belonging to the West by engaging in a policy of sending “an enduring invitation to Western nations to include South Africa in their collective security arrangements and to accept it as an ideological, security and economic partner” (Long and Grillot, 30). In the 1970s, acquiring nuclear weapons was a means of joining the collective security (Ibid.) and internalizing some of the Hopfian Other’s identity. By the late 1980s, as mentioned above, South Africa did not have real usage for its nuclear weapons anymore and they had become a burden to the country’s economy. At that time South Africa was unable to blackmail the West, yet it still wanted to remain a part of it. This presented a necessity for a new strategy that was enacted in 1989 when Frederik de Klerk was elected president and the deconstruction of the apartheid system began. Ending apartheid was a landmark shift in strategies because after the Cold War ended, the apartheid system was one of the country’s major obstacles to getting out of its political isolation. There were simply no reasons, political or otherwise, for the West to tolerate South Africa’s racist domestic policies. (Ibid., 32).

The constructivist explanation also differs from realists and liberals on the extent to which they think strategic and economic national interests played a role in South Africa’s decision to dismantle their nuclear weapons. Hopf reasons that evidence of the existence of an interest does not mean that the interest has been identified and contextualized (16). Instead, he argues, interests are implications of identity and even though “individuals always operate according to their interests ... those interests do not always correspond to the ones assigned by the omniscient objective observer” (Ibid., 18). Rather than taking the argument that South Africa dismantled its nuclear weapons because it was in their geostrategic and economic interests to do so as a theoretical truth, constructivists seek to understand how South Africa’s dominant ideology shaped its interests. They argue that South Africa’s desire to be accepted by the West led to the liberalization of markets and disarmament because that was what the Western discourse of the time constituted of.

Which Theory Explains Best?

It is clear that the realist, liberal and constructivist explanations about why South Africa dismantled its nuclear weapons are competitive with each other. Even though there is merit in each of them, constructivism does the best job in explaining the nuclear disarmament because it has the most in-depth insight into the Issue.

In essence, realists only analyze state as actors in the international relations system. Liberals, too, look at the state as an actor on the systemic level, but also explain that a state's policies are determined by whether there is democracy, free market and/or peace on the domestic level. Constructivists do not deny that there is an international system within which states act or that the three core liberal values affect relations between countries, but they do take the analysis one step further and argue that analysts of international relations cannot take theoretical assumptions as *a priori* true.

Constructivism argues that in order to be able to explain states' policies with the most precision we need to understand who the domestic decision makers are and what identities they represent. This approach makes the most sense because none of the three theories has denied the existence of identities. Constructivism is the only one that provides a coherent explanation of how these identities influence international relations.

Specifically, in the case of South Africa we can see that at the beginning of de Klerk's rule, the "personality" of the state as Wendt calls it (1999, 10) was to try to be like the West and to become their friend for ally. The aspirations to identify with the Western countries did lead decision makers to adopt policies that in the end resulted in the liberal ideals of democracy, free trade and peace, and that realists would explain as attempts to guarantee power and security. Yet, they did so because of the nature of South Africa's identity not because of the realist and liberal assumptions that states always act the same way when faced with questions about the future of their nuclear weapons.

Also regarding South Africa, realism and liberalism fail to explain why their assumptions about states in an international system hold true. Realism does not demonstrate successfully why countries are always interested in preserving their security and why the decision makers pursue the goal of maximizing their relative power, be it economic, military, or political. Liberalism falls short explaining why countries decide to comply with the norms and standards set by institutions even after they have joined. The theory seems to assume that all states' identities constitute that institutions are effective if they comply with their norms. Yet, this assumption is not consistent with the rest of the theory which argues that, on the domestic level, states are different.

Conclusion

All in all, even though the three theories have some overlap and agreement about the way the international relations' system is organized, they still remain distinct in explaining the motives of the actors in that system. In light of many of the current political issues, South Africa's nuclear disarmament serves as an especially interesting case study to be used for

demonstrating these theories. Looking at the three different theories' explanations helps to understand the variety of ways international policies can be perceived.

To be precise, this paper demonstrated that for realists like Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz, the central point of discussion is the distribution of power. They claim that South Africa dismantled its nuclear weapons to be more efficient and shift its power from the military to economic sphere.

Liberals like Michael Mandelbaum argue that, due to the democratization and liberation of markets that occurred with the fall of the apartheid regime in South Africa, the country became more prone to peace. South Africa was able to implement and maintain the disarmament program because of the pressure that was put on it by the framework of the Non-Proliferation Treaty it joined.

Alexander Wendt and Ted Hopf as constructivists reject the assumptions liberals and realists make about the motives of South Africa altogether. They argue that it engaged in the nuclear disarmament strategy because its new identity produced a desire to become like its Western counterparts. In order to be able to become a part of the West the white elite portrayed South Africa as a peaceful, democratic and cooperative state. For that insightfulness, depth and individual-case-based analysis of it, the constructivist approach seems most reasonable in explaining the actions of South Africa.

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