The Leviathan of the Bomb: Hobbes, Realism, and the International Prison System

Cameron Vaziri

Neorealists claim that the international arena is in a state of anarchy and liberal institutions cannot overcome the sovereign interests of the modern nation-state. With no guarantor of peace, nation-states seek resources to achieve sufficient material power to guarantee their own security. While this competition offers an incentive for violence it also provides various balance of power configurations that disincentivize great power conflicts. However, nuclear weapons reveal that there exists an achievable cap on the value of material power that suspends the need for resource competition and conventional force balancing. Once mutual deterrence is achieved, material power rivalries are replaced by discursive power competitions as threats are no longer determined by their capacity, but instead by their willingness, to engage in conflict.

Modern threats are determined by their "otherness," which leads to the projection of characteristics or values that lack the underlying "rational self-interest" upon which deterrence theory relies. In response to the threat of difference, nuclear powers create networks of discursive power to exert disciplinary control over those deemed a threat to the supposed order of the bomb. Conventional forces become the disciplinary mechanism used to coerce lesser powers to acquiesce to a nuclear nation-state's ordering regime, or worse, to eliminate them altogether.

This paper recasts our understanding of the state of anarchy in the nuclear age by offering a competing interpretation of the underlying Hobbesian theory to that offered by neorealists. Additionally, it details how difference is cast as a threat to the deterrence logic of mutually assured destruction (MAD), necessitating the establishment of disciplinary regimes. Taken together, these two theses support my larger endeavor of incorporating Michel Foucault's theorization of power politics into an international relations heuristic I refer to as the *international prison system*.

1. The Theoretical and Political Contexts of the Critique

The classical realists saw their projects as pragmatic engagements with the gritty and hard truths of a reality all too often glossed over by their more utopian and idealistic counterparts. As Machiavelli said of his work, "my purpose is to write something useful to him who comprehends it, I have decided that I must concern myself with the truth of the matter as facts show it rather than with any fanciful notion."[1] Neorealists see themselves as a continuation of this practical approach;[2] so when reading a hard truth like that of Hobbes' state of nature, the neorealist ascribes a grim and sometimes fatalistic outlook on international affairs. As John Mearsheimer states, "realists are pessimists when it comes to international politics…[as] they see no easy way to escape the harsh world of security competition and war."[3]

I do not intend to offer a defense of utopianism. Rather, I aim to challenge the neorealist reading of Hobbes which omits the role of ethics and cooperation for fear of falling prey to what E. H. Carr critiques as "realist progressivism."[4] In its place, I advance Michel Foucault's reading from his lecture series, *Society Must be Defended*, which avoids both the fatalism of neorealism and the

[1] Niccolo Machiavelli, "The Prince," in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others, Volume 1*, 5-96, trans. Allan Gilbert (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1999), 57.

[2] E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, ed. Michael Cox (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 10 & 63-4.

[3] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001), 17.

[4] E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, ed. Michael Cox (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 65.

excessive optimistic determinism of Marxist realist historicism.[5] This is not simply a hermeneutic exercise; it leads to substantively different ways of viewing the international context, differences which are emphasized by the advent of nuclear weapons.

My criticism of neorealist applications of Hobbes addresses foundational assumptions common to the various branches of the tradition. These elements include: the state of nature and security competition, the materialist understanding of power, and the relationships between peace and order with the balance of powers. Where I do engage specific neorealist perspectives, I concentrate on responding to major figures of the tradition, including E. H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz, Stephen Walt, and John Mearsheimer. Therefore, even while alternative variants and caveats can be offered, the meaningful elements of this criticism undermine the neorealist paradigm.

For example, Stephen Walt's acknowledgement that nation-states may go to war to seek personal or national glory does not undermine the centrality of material definitions of power in security competition for defensive realism. However, a rejection of this materialism would deal a critical blow to the heuristic model.[6] Indeed, based on how neorealists perceive themselves and frame the classical figures of their tradition, they often consider themselves to be the "most materialist" international relations theory.[7] This is how Kenneth Waltz develops his reading of Hobbes in constructing defensive realism.[8] For his part, the offensive realist, John Mearsheimer, classifies the three branches of realism (human nature, defensive, and offensive) by two metrics – the structural level of state competition and the quantity of power states desire – both defined materially.[9]

In demonstrating how I will both undermine neorealist precepts and offer an alternative conceptual framing of international politics, we can return to Stephen Walt and his account of the past thirty years of American foreign policy. What Walt describes as the pursuit of glory is the failed policies he collectively refers to as the "liberal grand strategy." He considers this an idealistic pursuit "to shape the world" with America (and the foreign policy establishment in particular) viewing itself as the "indispensable nation" doing good for the world.[10] Its idealism is thus contrary to supposedly more levelheaded neorealist approaches, such as his prescribed offshore balancing, that would secure material power interests.[11]

However, the international prison system model demonstrates that this "grand strategy" was not idealistic but driven by security concerns arising from the immaterial fears of cultural, ideological, and moral difference. The desire to establish a liberal world order is based on the assumption that those outside of America's disciplinary system are, in fact, "monsters" that America needs to seek out and destroy.[12] In other words, the alternative proposal offered here refutes the paradox identified by Walt and instead claims that the primacy of the U.S., which made the ambitious grand strategy possible, also made it all the *more* necessary.[13] In the international prison system, the establishment, spread, and maintenances of an ideological order is seen as essential to

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[5] E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, ed. Michael Cox (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 65.

[6] Stephen Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), xii & 13-4.

[7] Daniel Deudney, "Regrounding Realism: Anarchy, Security, and Changing Material Contexts," *Security Studies* 10, no. 1 (2000): 2.

[8] Ibid., 1.

[9] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001), 22.

[10] Stephen Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 13-4.

[11] Ibid., 260-2.

[12] Ibid., 13-4.

[13] Ibid., 13.

national security, as evidenced by America's conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, and the broader War on Terror.

I am by no means the first to propose that the nuclear threat impacted the security calculus of neorealism. Robert Jervis argues that the unwinnable, indeed suicidal, nature of nuclear war undermines the pretense of rational self-interest that grounds realist competition logic.[14] Daniel Deudney's engagement with neorealism and nuclear weapons also focuses on their connection to Hobbes.[15] Deudney's conclusion points to a potential obsolescence of the nation-state in the nuclear age.[16] In the theoretical engagement of nuclear weapons by early neorealists such as Morgenthau, Deudney identifies a push towards "one-worldism" which was largely abandoned by the rest of the neorealist tradition.[17] He resurrects this model to legitimize and frame his own liberalism seeking to push for a security order that moves beyond the dualism of anarchy and hierarchy.[18]

A comparison can be drawn between this drive to liberal "one-worldism"[19] and the thesis of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their work, *Empire*. Both argue for the dwindling usefulness of the category of the modern nation-state. Whereas Deudney's theory is oriented around nuclear security concerns driving the world towards a liberal order, Hardt and Negri move towards globalist empire driven by capital interests.[20] Against both, I push back to emphasize that security concerns force us to maintain the category of the nation-state as their anxieties of the "irrational" other impedes the drive to relinquish sovereignty to international liberal or capital interests. The complex politics of identity and the construction of the other as a threat undermines the realist position of material power competition tied to rational self-interests and the internationalism of both liberalism and anti-globalist Marxist formulations.

2. The State of Nature: Battlefield or Theater?

The Neorealist Reading: The Competitive Battlefield

The pessimism of neorealists rests on three elements in their reading of Hobbes. The first of these is that the anarchy of the international arena corresponds to the state of nature. This means that while no international institutions override nation-state sovereignty, none also offers a genuine security guarantee. As such, nation-states suffer from constant existential anxieties which compel them to increase their capacity to protect themselves – the security drive for power. Thus, while anarchy itself is not tantamount to violence, it creates a landscape of competition that necessarily leads to its inevitability.[21]

The second element of the neorealist reading is the material definition of power. On this point, the two major schools (offensive and defensive realism) agree. However, where they diverge is

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[14] Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1984), 19-20.

[15] Daniel Deudney, "Regrounding Realism: Anarchy, Security, and Changing Material Contexts," *Security Studies* 10, no. 1 (2000): 21 & 32-3.

[16] Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and Waltz* (New York: Columbia UP, 2003), x.

[17] Daniel Deudney, "Regrounding Realism: Anarchy, Security, and Changing Material Contexts," *Security Studies* 10, no. 1 (2000): 20.

[18] Ibid., 41-2.

[19] I say "one-worldism" to avoid the unnecessary and inaccurate connection between Deudney and globalism, especially given the contrast to Hardt and Negri's thesis. While Deudney does describe one-worldism in his article, it is an articulation of Morgenthau's theory, not a term he ascribes to the liberal internationalism he discusses elsewhere.

[20] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000), xi-xvi.

[21] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001), 30-2; Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 102-3.

the recognition, or recommendation, of the use of violence to increase the nation-state's material power to ensure their security. The offensive realists take a more maximalist approach, seeking aggression and acquisition to increase material power, with hegemonic status as the ultimate goal.[22] Defensive realists only pursue marginal increases of power to maintain a relative balance.[23] For both, the drive for material power is not some intrinsic desire or will to power, it is always guided by one interest: *security*.[24] Reflecting on their interpretation of Hobbes and other classical realists, Deudney not only considers neorealism to be the "most materialist of contemporary theories," but indicts that materialism as relatively "truncated and impoverished," ignoring factors beyond distribution.[25]

This leads us to the third element, the relationship between the balance of power and the maintenance of order or peace in the international arena. All neorealists articulate a configuration of power that generates some degree of stability despite the lack of a supranational governing body. However, this configuration may differ depending on the theorist. One such configuration is multipolarity, like that prescribed by Hans Morgenthau, in which a small plurality of great powers is necessary to disincentivize any one of them from aggressing against another even if they assumed, accurately or not, a potential power advantage.[26]

While opposed in their assessments of the degree to which nation-states seek power, both offensive (Mearsheimer) and defensive (Waltz) neorealists agree on the virtues of a bipolar configuration. Due to the difficulties of determining material power disparities, bipolarity offers an alternative that reduces the risk of miscalculation. Having two great powers offers stable competition with less risk of either party lashing out against a supposedly weaker party, as well as the potential multipolar problem of great power alliances.[27]

In theory, a unipolar order avoids the risk of these calculative errors altogether and establishes a global world order based on their ideological and moral orientations. After all, this is the theory Stephen Walt offers of the supposed U.S. liberal grand strategy.[28] This would also resemble the Hobbesian *sovereign* elevated to the international level as a *hegemon*.[29] However, traditionally, neorealists have argued against the theoretical possibility of a unipolar order.[30] Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, unipolarity was seemingly at hand, at which point the impossible was recast as undesirable.[31] More than that, it was deemed unsustainable and promised a relapse to either bipolarity or, more likely, multipolarity.[32] This position is seemingly validated based on the present circumstances with the rise of China, the return

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[22] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001), 21-2.
[23] Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 126-7.
[24] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001), 21; Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 126.
[25] Daniel Deudney, "Regrounding Realism: Anarchy, Security, and Changing Material Contexts," *Security Studies* 10, no. 1 (2000): 2 & 10-3.
[26] Hans Morgenthau, "International Morality" & "Disarmament," in *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Knopf, 1948).
[27] John J. Mearsheimer, "Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War," *The Atlantic*, 1990, https://www.theatlantic.com/past/politics/foreign/mearsh.htm; Kenneth Waltz, "The Stability of a Bipolar World," *Daedalus* 93, no. 3 (1964): 881-7.
[28] Stephen Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 13-4.
[29] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1994), 105-10.
[30] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001), 2-3.
[31] John J. Mearsheimer, "Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War," *The Atlantic*, 1990, https://www.theatlantic.com/past/politics/foreign/mearsh.htm.
[32] Ibid.

of aggressive Russian expansionism, and the formation of the European bloc which is becoming increasingly separated from the U.S.[33]

In sum, the neorealist reading of Hobbes elevates his individual analysis to the international level. The basic unit of the nation-state exists within an anarchic system with no guarantor of security. Thus, nation-states seek out material power to maintain or increase their capacity to protect themselves. Finally, by recognizing the risks of taking on comparably powerful rivals, order within the anarchy can be forged by some balance of power configuration.

Foucault's Reading: A Theater of Signs

In this section, I not only elucidate Foucault's reading, but also demonstrate why it is superior in describing the situation of the nuclear age. We will again trace the three elements of neorealism and Hobbes: the state of nature, the material analysis of power, and the balance of power's establishment and maintenance of peace.

For Foucault, Hobbes' state of nature is not brutish and violent, but is ironically peaceful. After all, the need to establish a deterrence capacity through military power is not achieved through violence but with communication – a theater of signs.[34] When the Soviet Union conducted its first successful atomic bomb test in 1949, the nuclear rivalry between the two great powers began. All too fittingly, this moment happened amidst the first golden age of TV.[35] After all, no device has had more of an impact on the consumption and distribution of images and symbols than the television set, and no image is more iconic than that of the mushroom cloud.

No weapon is a more potent tool in the Hobbesian theater of signs than the nuclear bomb. The entire practice of deterrence is a projection of the signifiers of power contrary to the technical materiality of the bomb itself. The bomb is a weapon yet one that is made so that it will never be used, but it is precisely this that makes it effective.[36] Implicit in deterrence theory is the communication of force but not its literal exertion – a display of willingness to establish the credibility of the threat.[37] While Hobbes describes the theatrical space of deterrence, it is Machiavelli that provides the script. As Michael McCanles explains:

> The first paradox of deterrence, then, is that we have discourse that has meaning only insofar as it refers to arms, while arms in turn only have meaning insofar as they are articulated in discourse. In the second half of *Il Principe* Machiavelli discloses the paradoxical fullness and emptiness of political and military maneuver, when he shows us that each of the following statements is true only if both are true: (1) discourse can threaten only if it refers to a transdiscursive power; (2) this transdiscursive power can threaten only to the extent that discourse refers to it.[38]

Neorealists, of course, recognize the role of power projection. Indeed, the potential capacity for a miscalculation of power is used by realists to bolster the role of nuclear weapons as they are a relatively easy unit to quantify and thus to establish a nation-state's deterrence capability. What they

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[33] Stephen Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 31-6 & 44-6.

[34] Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 92.

[35] James L. Baughman, "Television in the 'Golden Age:' And Entrepreneurial Experiment," *The Historian* 47, no. 2 (1985): 177.

[36] William Chaloupka, *Knowing Nukes: The Politics and Culture of the Atom* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 12.

[37] Michael McCanles, "Machiavelli and the Paradoxes of Deterrence," *Diacritics* 14, no. 2 (1984): 14.

[38] Ibid., 14.

miss is what Foucault recognizes – that in the state of nature material power is indissociable from *will*.

This brings us to the question of material power. Foucault's reading of Hobbes notes that material capacity is not the sole determining factor in the establishment of the other as a threat. As Foucault states in his reading of Hobbes:

> We are in a theater where presentations are exchanged, in a relationship of fear in which there are no time limits…We are not at war; we are in what Hobbes specifically calls a state of war. There is a text in which he states: 'Warre consisteth not in Battel onely, or in the act of fighting; but in a tract of time, wherein the Will to contend by Battel is sufficiently known.' The tract of time designates, then, the state and not the battle, and what is at stake is not the forces themselves, but the will, a will that is sufficiently known, or in other words [endowed with] a system of representations and manifestations that is effective within this field of primal diplomacy.[39]

This *will* is presented as distinct from the quantifiable metrics that underly deterrence logic as well as the theatrical presentations of that material capacity. In other words, *will* is that which leads a state to act and may compel them to do so in contravention to their material self-interests or even against self-preservation – to act in spite of deterrence. As Ira Chernus demonstrates, "[t]he Cold War is… a theatrical event."[40] The main actors are the experts, the public is the audience, and the show is the demonstration of one's willingness to use the bomb in the name of deterrence.[41] In a world of wills, it is natural that the anxieties of the nation-state should return as deterrence means nothing to the agent willing to die for a cause. However, this requires a move to an analytical system that neorealists cannot access, a heuristic capable of engaging in the immaterial world of ideals.

It is important not to confuse the issues of theater and peace. The nuclear age is not absent war and hostility, instead we must consider nation-state competition across two levels. On one tier exists nuclear powers and, on the other, non-nuclear nation-states. For neorealists, the balance of power is the logical conclusion of the state of anarchy. However, this is only the case because of their rejection of the possibility for the establishment of a hegemon akin to Hobbes' sovereign on the international scale. For Hobbes himself, the balance of power fails in maintaining order or peace. As Foucault identifies, natural differences stop competition as the relations of force are already known – "differences lead to peace."[42] Only with a balance of power where differences are minor is there an incentive for war, which is born of uncertainty and the possibility of victory.[43]

This returns Foucault to the theatrical as, "a man who wishes to avoid war can do so only one condition: he must show that he is ready to wage war."[44] Thus, for Foucault and his reading of Hobbes, the avoidance of war through deterrence requires three components:

> First, calculated presentations: my presentation of the strength, of the other, my presentation of the other's presentation of my strength, and so on. Second, emphatic and pronounced expressions of will: you make it obvious that you want war, you demonstrate that you will not abandon the idea of war. Third, you use mutually intimidatory tactics: I am so afraid of waging war that I will feel safe only if you are at least as afraid of war as I – and, insofar as that is possible, more afraid of it than I.[45]

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[39] Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 92-3.

[40] Ira Chernus, "Nuclear Images in the Popular Press: From Apocalypse to Static Balance," in *A Shuddering Dawn: Religious Studies and the Nuclear Age*, ed. Ira Chernus and Edward Linenthal (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989), 38.

[41] Ibid., 38.

[42] Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 91.

[43] Ibid., 91.

[44] Ibid., 91-2.

[45] Ibid., 92.

These conditions lead to what Foucault refers to as a *state of war* in contrast to being *at war*.

We can see how this plays out amongst the two tiers of power of the nuclear age. Amongst non-nuclear powers, the anarchy of minor differences makes war amongst comparable powers feasible and so we see such contests – Armenia and Azerbaijan, Iran and the Arab states via proxy conflicts in Yemen and Syria, and the wars of the former Yugoslav republics. As each state feels the potential for victory, they fail to satisfy the third condition – they do not equally fear war. Amongst nuclear powers, this arrangement is the opposite. The idea of a balance of power only becomes feasible with the bomb as the totality of its material power, its sheer destructiveness, enshrines that third element. Deterrence logic, mutually assured destruction, is defined by its capacity to guarantee that all parties equally fear war. Thus, while nuclear nation-states may remain in a *state of war*, they never actually engage in the act.

Foucault's reading of Hobbes challenges the neorealist formulation along three critical lines. Regarding the state of nature, the depiction of a space necessitating a competition for security is replaced by a theatrical presentation of strength and *will*. Thus, power is not simply reducible to material analyses. This becomes that much more significant with the advent of nuclear weapons and the rise of deterrence logic. Finally, the balance of power is undermined as Hobbes points to imbalance as the cause of peace. Balancing only becomes a vehicle for peace once nuclear weapons make the risk of confrontation so total that all powers involved are equally and absolutely terrified of war. Thus, a state of war without an actual war maintains order in the international arena. Yet, this state of war and peace is merely a façade that masks a larger system of violent domination.

Anarchy & Power: The Space for Domination

For Hobbes, the alleviation of the anarchy of the state of nature arrives with the ascension of the sovereign.[46] Taking an extreme view of contract theory, this rise is always consensual by those under the dominion of the sovereign even if the result of war. After all, Hobbes' project is to delegitimize the theories of conquest used to justify the English Civil War.[47] Thus, he argues that implied by the cessation of hostilities is the consent to subjugation.[48] With this consent, the governed are protected in exchange for augmenting their power to the sovereign's.[49]

Elevating this to the international scale, we see where neorealism breaks with Hobbesian logic. We could assume the great power configuration was a consensual formation by lesser powers. However, for Hobbes, the mere entry of a rival to the sovereign returns us to the state of nature and anarchy.[50] The competition that arises with anything but a stable unipolar power arrangement means that a multiplicity of great powers cannot be tantamount to the sovereign. Thus, the formation of a balance of power arrangement is not a consensual or willful organization by nation-states but a phenomenon that arises from material competition. We thus return to a strict material analysis of power with no account of *will*.

Instead, we can look to Foucault's critique of Hobbes which concludes his reading. Hobbes' focus on the question of the legitimacy or applicability of conquests of acquisition masks the

[46] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1994), 105-10.
[47] Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 110-1.
[48] Ibid., 97-9.
[49] Sandra Field, "Hobbes and the Question of Power," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 52, no. 1 (2014): 67-8.
[50] Ibid., 80-1.

ongoing war of social relations.[51] Foucault analyzes the English Civil War as a confrontation regarding the legitimacy of Norman institutional rule over the Anglo-Saxons and their normative constructs. In other words, from William the Conqueror to Charles I, Foucault sees a perpetual conflict in which a social order was violently imposed. Thus, we must shift the framing of our historical analysis:

> Once we begin to talk about power relations, we are not talking about right, and we are not talking about sovereignty; we are talking about domination, about an infinitely dense and multiple domination that never comes to an end. There is no escape from domination, and there is therefore no escape from history. Hobbes' philosophico-juridical discourse was a way of blocking this political historicism, which was the discourse and the knowledge that was actually active in the political struggles of the seventeenth century.[52]

Instead of conquests of acquisition concerned with material power accumulation, we move to conquests of domination. Armed with this, we can turn to the analysis of conflicts and power arrangements between nuclear and non-nuclear nation-states.

3. The International Prison System

With nuclear weapons and MAD, there exists an effective cap on material power. When applying Foucault's three criteria from Hobbes to nuclear powers, they have sufficient presentations of strength (1), expression of their willingness to use that strength (2), and fear of the consequences of an actualized war (3), all at precisely the moment they engage in the play of mutually assured destruction. As a function of security, conventional military arms become entirely obsolete. Any war involving a nuclear-armed state can and will go nuclear the moment it becomes a tangible existential threat to its security, even if otherwise entirely conventional and against a non-nuclear power.

What then is the virtue of a conventional military for a nuclear power free of the security concerns derived from the anarchy of the international arena? The question is answered by the immaterial element Foucault identifies in Hobbes, the problem of *will*. Deterrence logic is just that, a logic, and requires the conformity of those who engage within its systemic implementation. However, it holds no sway over the illogical – those willing to violate the precepts that ground the deterrence function of mutually assured destruction. Those willing to engage in a suicidal illogic pose an existential threat to nuclear powers.

Of course, Foucault is famous for his work on madness, notably its social construction. Or, more accurately, that *reason* is a historico-epistemic construct which defines itself by the exclusion at the periphery of those seen as other and thus labeled the *insane*.[53] In other words, rather than through some objective analysis or self-identification, those in power – the nuclear nation-state – can construct those they choose as insane threats and potential violators of deterrence norms. Madness, as a condition, is thrust upon any deemed to be in violation of the nuclear order – the rogue state, the evil empire, or the terrorist threat.

In having the potential *will* to violate deterrence, the "other" returns as an existential security risk despite a nuclear nation-state having achieved maximally utilizable material power. However, this willingness does not need to be confirmed or even a reality, the mere projection of a party as an

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[51] Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 110.

[52] Ibid., 111.

[53] Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, ed. Jean Khalfa, trans. Jonathan Murphy & Jean Khalfa (New York: Routledge, 2009), xxix-xxx; Noam Chomsky & Michel Foucault, *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate: On Human Nature* (New York: The New Press, 2006), 43-4.

irrational actor is enough to upend the deterrence mechanism. This creates a demand to control the *will* of others, to ensure that no ideology, culture, or moral schema jeopardizes the ironically MAD logic. This is what Foucault refers to as discursive power, the use of disciplinary regimes to remove difference and individuality ensuring conformity.[54]

Given that nuclear powers retain a deterrence capacity, even when constructed as mad, no act to discipline them can be engaged in by another power. One must simply live with their "madness" as the U.S. did with the "evil empire" during the Cold War and the myriad nuclear rivalries existing today. Amongst tier one powers, little of the disciplinary apparatus can overcome national sovereignty. However, in engaging with tier two powers, there is little to no restraint.

A nuclear power suffers no existential risk in engaging militarily with a non-nuclear nation-state. The direct threat of the hostile engagement can always be overcome with overwhelming nuclear force. Even the dangers of overstretching conventional military forces, which offers a constraint for theorists like Morgenthau, is irrelevant with nuclear weapons. No matter how bogged down the U.S. was in Korea, Vietnam, or Iraq and Afghanistan, it was always America's nukes that protected them from Soviet, Russian, or Chinese aggression. Even where defensive pacts offer buck-passing arrangements, it is highly unlikely that escalation to nuclear conflict would occur, by the same deterrence logic that holds the nuclear rivals at bay. What benefit is there to sacrifice oneself even for an ally, especially for those, like neorealists, primarily interested in a material analysis?

This simultaneous anxiety towards the nuclear other while being unable to dominate or eradicate them impedes the move towards Morgenthau's one-worldism, Deudney's liberalism, or Hardt and Negri's empire. Each nuclear nation-state retains a sovereign domain. However, non-nuclear powers lack the protection of MAD or any real guarantee of protection under a nuclear umbrella. While largely uninterested in material acquisition, nuclear powers retain the drive for conquests of domination – the control of social relations between nation-states – in a system of power politics. The potential for any non-nuclear power to rise up and threaten a nuclear nation-state's security either through their own development of a bomb or a devastating total war – both suicidal prospects – demonstrates the security risk of *will*. Nuclear powers must then create systems of control to suppress the exertion of this *will* contrary to their security interests. Hence the role of conventional military forces, the disciplinary mechanism meant to establish and ensure a discursive regime.

Thus, we have a situation in which the discursive networks of nuclear nation-states expand beyond their sovereign territories but are limited by the domains of their nuclear rivals who have their own arrangements. Past formulations refer to these networks as spheres of influence or civilizational blocs, but their disciplinary nature offers a better alternative model: the *prison*. Multiple prison systems maintain order – compliance with deterrence – in the international system. Those rogues outside the walls that threaten the integrity of the system must be dealt with, either by being incarcerated or eradicated.

However, simply being within *a* prison system does not alleviate security concerns as nuclear powers continue to distrust each other and their relative networks, even if unable to act upon these anxieties. Where nuclear powers can act is against those tier two powers, even when within the dominion of another nuclear nation-state. Thus, an arrangement between Iran and Russia or China does little to alleviate America's fears of Iranian nuclearization. Additionally, unlike with civilizational blocs or buck-passing spheres of influence, with the prison system we see why Russia and China would be unwilling to commit to a defense of Iran when the U.S. engaged in direct strikes in 2025. Their relationships with Iran are not ontological or metaphysical, they are carceral – a social

[54] Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 192-4.

phenomenon of power politics. With nuclear deterrence removing material power as a security issue, the harm to Iran as a material ally is relatively irrelevant. As a matter of disciplinary control, nothing could have been done against the U.S. had they succeeded in "claiming" their "prisoner." As Iran remains outside of America's jurisdiction, so to speak, all the better for those who house Iran within their own prison walls.

We can see then that what Stephen Walt describes as the liberal grand strategy was the attempted expansion of the dominion of America's disciplinary regime – a growth of its prison. Rather than born of some idealistic liberal fantasy, the prison model reveals the security impetus that would drive the U.S. to establish a world order even at the risk of collapsing its conventional military capacity. After all, the modern threat is not military or economic decline but normative difference. As long as the nuclear deterrent is sufficiently maintained, the only security concern faced by nuclear nation-states is the immaterial notion of *will*.

4. Conclusion

The nuclear age has changed the security dynamics that influence the actions of nation-states. With the deterrence logic of MAD, a functional cap on material power undermines the driving impulses described by neorealists. In turn, what is revealed as the primary security concern for nation-states is the element neorealists omit in their reading of Hobbes – *will*. This is not simply a portrayal of *will* in the theatrical play of power projection, but the potential of *will* to undermine the very logic of deterrence that demands its projection in the first place.

The potential willingness of actors to violate the deterrence logic resurrects the security concerns of even the most conventionally powerful nuclear states who otherwise would think themselves free of this existential anxiety in a purely material analysis. However, the intangibility of *will* offers a vastly greater potential for miscalculation than any analysis of conventional forces. Rather than through a self-assertion or demonstration of a willingness to disregard the rational self-interest of MAD, Foucault reveals that irrationality is often projected onto the "other" because of their alterity. Difference implies the threat to deterrence logic and must be removed either through coerced conformity or eradication.

This is the purpose of the modern discursive regime. Nuclear nation-states seek to impose this order using a disciplinary apparatus modeled on the panoptic prison, enforced and embodied by convention military forces. This prison model better explains the tenuous nature of security ties amongst allies and the desperate ambition of nuclear powers to expand their influence even absent material security concerns. The failed ambitions identified by Stephen Walt of the last thirty years of American foreign policy were not idealistic or utopian, born of hubris or a sense of higher purpose, or a pursuit of individual or national glory. Rather, they were the result of the security concerns of the nuclear age – the move from conquests of acquisition to domination, the prominence and overt emphasis of power politics, and the shift to a discursive mode of power.