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Proliferate to Abolish: Mazrui’s Perspective on Nuclear Disarmament

SEIFUDEIN ADEM 

Africa’s perspectives on nuclear weapons (and other world-order issues) remain largely unexplored. They are, therefore, little known or not known at all. This essay seeks to take a modest step to fill the gap by bringing into focus the nuclear discourse of the Kenyan scholar Ali Mazrui—a forgotten “classic,” many of whose ideas have stood the test of time and might even help us to better understand the nature of the challenges of global nuclear disarmament as well as think creatively about solutions. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, Mazrui was a passionate and foremost proponent of the proliferation of nuclear weapons in Africa and the Middle East. However, he never advocated this for its own sake but only as a means of achieving the most fundamental and desirable goal of global nuclear disarmament. A dose of the disease, in Mazrui’s view, must be used as a part of the necessary cure. Hence his idea—“proliferate to abolish.”

INTRODUCTION

Ali Mazrui emerged into international visibility after he began to teach at Makerere College (later named Makerere University) in Uganda in 1963. In 1973, he fell out of favor with Uganda’s brutal dictator Idi Amin, felt his life was at risk, and fled to the United States. This self-imposed exile lasted for the rest of Mazrui’s life. However, he continued to maintain strong links with different African countries. He retired from his position as the Albert Schweitzer Chair in the Humanities at Binghamton University in New York in August 2014. He died at the age of 81 in October 2014.

In his extensive writings on nuclear issues, both published and unpublished, that span a period of over 40 years, Mazrui advocated what I call the idea of “proliferate to abolish” or a (limited or modest) horizontal nuclear proliferation—the spread of nuclear weapons in Africa and the Middle East—as a necessary step to facilitate total nuclear disarmament.

Underlying this idea are at least four assumptions: (1) nuclear weapons are evil by nature and should be illegitimate, not just for some, but for all; (2) a modest horizontal nuclear proliferation in the Global South would increase nuclear anxieties within the major nuclear powers; (3) this, in turn, would intensify the pressure on them for total military denuclearization; and (4) ultimately, the whole process would lead to the rejection of nuclear weapons by all and their abolition. Despite such a seemingly counter-intuitive position, or because of it, Mazrui once served as Chair of a UN Committee on Nuclear Proliferation with special reference to the Middle East (Mazrui 2005: 5). This essay seeks to record how his ideas evolved over the decades—thematically as well as chronologically. It also attempts to interpret and contextualize them.

But why should what Mazrui had to say on nuclear proliferation interest us in the first place? Why should we care about his nuclear discourse?

It must be noted first that Mazrui's set of ideas about nuclear weapons is beginning to be recognized as a distinct school of thought from the Global South (Singer 2008; Samuel 2020; Pretorius 2020; Bandarra et al. 2022). It is, therefore, important to introduce it more fully.

It is also said, correctly in my view, that the most relevant question to ask to go beyond nuclear weapons is: What will change the mindset of major nuclear powers to abolish nuclear weapons once and for all? If so, Mazrui had been asking for decades precisely this question (and many more)—and answering it in a stimulating, if sometimes controversial, way (see, for instance, Soyinka 1991; Said 1994: 38–39; Wai 1997; Horowitz 2006; Adem, Mutunga, and Mazrui 2013; Adem 2014; Adem, Adibe, Bangura, and Bemath 2016; Adem and Njogu 2018; Krauthammer 1986; Martin 2014; Mittelman 2014; Adem 2021).

Mazrui was genuinely concerned about the spread of nuclear weapons. But his vision of how a nuclear-free world could be realized diverged radically from the mainstream discourse. However, another interpretation may also be possible. As distinct as it was from the status-quo thinking, his perspective attempted to bridge the gap between Western concerns and the Global South's apprehensions about nuclear matters. In its simplest form, Mazrui's argument", as expounded in this article, was that Western distrust of nuclear weapons in the Global South could or should usher in a new era of global military denuclearization.

For these reasons, it can be said that, in spite of its imperfections, Mazrui's perspective may provide additional insights into some of the challenges to global nuclear disarmament and alternative solutions.

Let me begin by classifying the contemporary discourse on nuclear deterrence into five broad schools of intellectual analysis. First comes the "absolute deterrence" school (of Kenneth Waltz 1981, 1990, among

others), for which the primary purpose any state seeks or uses nuclear weapons is for deterrence.

Second, the “qualified deterrence” school (see Sagan 1994; Nye 2023, for instance) sees nuclear weapons in the Global South as having a significantly reduced deterrence value. In the Global South, according to this school, nuclear weapons cannot maintain stable deterrence.

Third, the “ambivalent deterrence” school (see Fitzpatrick 2009, for example) posits that nuclear proliferation (and nuclear use) can stimulate nuclear disarmament or further nuclear proliferation. It all depends on the specific context.

Fourth, the “abolish to abolish” school (of Nkrumah 1962; Mandela 1998) stresses that nuclear weapons are too dangerous to be of use for anyone or any purpose, including deterrence, since a threat of violence itself is a form of violence. These weapons should, therefore, be abolished. It is worth noting that the emerging discourse around the 2017 Ban Treaty also chimes with the “abolish to abolish” school.

Finally, one step ahead of the “abolish to abolish” school is the “proliferate to abolish” school, which, as will be elaborated more fully below, postulates that if a modest horizontal nuclear proliferation takes place in the Global South, it will increase nuclear anxieties within the major nuclear powers in the Global North, intensifying the pressure for total nuclear disarmament and ultimately leading to the rejection of nuclear weapons by all. Ali Mazrui was a leading proponent of this school.

Both the “abolish to abolish” and “proliferate to abolish” schools are unified by their shared pursuit of universal nuclear demilitarization. When we further juxtapose the two perspectives, we can see, on the one hand, that the former suggests that all states, including nuclear-weapon states, should join the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) or the Ban Treaty. The latter is pessimistic that the major nuclear-weapon states would ever do so of their own volition. More drastically, therefore, it suggests that non-nuclear-weapon states must withdraw from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Mazrui (2006: 169–170) noted in this regard:

President Kwame Nkrumah organized a “ban the bomb” international conference in Accra at the beginning of the 1960s ... All this made sense at the time it was happening in the early 1960s ... To move from the periphery to the mainstream of action in the nuclear field in the 21st century, Africa would have to get out of its technological shyness and nuclear inhibition.

But what was wrong with the NPT from the point of view of the “proliferate to abolish” school? Why does the “proliferate to

abolish” school suggest that non-nuclear states should now withdraw from it?

ASSESSING NUCLEAR NONPROLIFERATION

Signed in 1968, the NPT was primarily designed to curb horizontal nuclear proliferation (expanding membership of the nuclear weapons club) and not vertical nuclear proliferation (expansion and modernization of existing nuclear arsenals). Whatever its original intention, Ali Mazrui (1980a: 17) thus observed: “... since 1968 ... vertical [nuclear] proliferation among the great powers has escalated faster than the horizontal addition of new members to the nuclear club.” The NPT also grants any group of states the right to declare their region nuclear-free. But for Mazrui (1987b), it is not enough to declare this or that region is a nuclear-free zone: “... [t]his whole planet ought to be declared a nuclear weapon free zone.” This means that the Ban Treaty is consistent with “proliferate to abolish.” It also affirms the former logically and temporally precedes the latter.

It is indeed true that the US and Russia have far fewer nuclear weapons today at their disposal. In 2022, there were 12,705 nuclear weapons—in the hands of nine states compared to 18,000 nuclear weapons, which the US and Russia alone possessed in 2012. (Hiroshima Report 2023: 10). But, as Joseph Nye (2023: 5) has observed recently: “While the number of nuclear warheads has declined ... , countries continue to modernize their arsenals.” In other words, vertical proliferation has continued. The significant step the US and Russia took in reducing the number of their nuclear warheads could, therefore, have nevertheless been more meaningful if the motivation was the belief that those weapons were evil. But that was the case is by no means all that clear.

With regard to horizontal nuclear proliferation, the current number of nuclear states (9) is lower than what President John F. Kennedy was said to have famously predicted: 20–30 nuclear states (Fitzpatrick 2009: 12; Gibbons 2022: 176; Nye 2023: 6). And what has been achieved is widely seen as an, in the words of Bollfrass and Herzog (2022: 10), “imperfect success.” Mazrui, too, would agree with such a description. But he would amplify its “imperfection.”

Mazrui stressed the desirability and imperativeness of universal nuclear disarmament. Yet, he was also the most persistent rationalizer of horizontal nuclear proliferation, or nuclear participation, as Mazrui (1967: 809) sometimes used to call it. If so, was Mazrui’s commitment to universal nuclear disarmament not at odds with his rationalization of horizontal

nuclear proliferation? What is the inner logic of his “proliferate to abolish”? Let us try to penetrate into some of its postulates and assumptions.

PROLIFERATE TO ABOLISH

At least four factors are relevant for understanding the origin of Ali Mazrui's idea of “proliferate to abolish.” First, Mazrui (1967: 812; 1978: 9–10) perceived that Europe and the US were treating the Third World countries differently when it came to nuclear energy and how its peaceful use should be safeguarded or monitored. “The nuclear age has a Euro-American elite,” Mazrui (1967: 813) thus observed, “complete with certain exclusive mutual privileges.” This perception anticipated what would be later referred to as nuclear orientalism (Gusterson 1999).

Indeed, there were worries in the mid-1960s in the US, as Jonathan Hunt (2022: 143) has recently documented, that: “... any major [advance in] nuclear capabilities among the populous, non-white nations of the earth would greatly strengthen their hand in attempting to obtain an ever-greater share of the earth's wealth and opportunity.” Mazrui (1967: 795–796) put a similar notion in this way: “... the distribution of military power affects the state of race relations in the world ...”

Secondly, Mazrui (1967: 809–815) thought some countries in the Global South were entertaining the idea that they had the “sovereign right” to seek nuclear energy for peaceful use and he believed that that was a “legitimate ambition;” he suggested that they were entitled to become members of the “nuclear age” if not the “nuclear club,” with the former denoting “participation in the science of the age” and the latter “possession of nuclear weapons,” respectively. However, Mazrui (2000: 76) also noted the dilemma in the eyes of the major nuclear powers between the “quest for peace,” which necessitated minimum membership in the nuclear club, and the “quest for human dignity,” which required maximum participation in the nuclear age. In other words, a country that can enrich uranium for fueling its nuclear reactor has at its disposal everything it needs should it wish further to enrich the uranium to a higher, weapons-grade level. To many in the West, it also seems, “absolute deterrence” does not work.

And yet Mazrui (1967: 809–810) went on to argue:

... the cause of trying to give more and more countries the sense of belonging to the age of nuclear technology might be worth the marginal risk of aggravating nuclear proliferation.

Thirdly, Mazrui (1967: 807) rejected the implicit assumption in the dominant nuclear discourse at the time that countries in the Global South were less committed to or less concerned about peace than those in the Global North; he believed that the “protective instinct” in humans is more violent than the “acquisitive instinct.”

The fourth factor pertains to the need to respond to the “qualified deterrence” school that maintained that states with radical ideologies were incapable of using nuclear weapons for deterrent purposes. Mazrui (1990: 247–248) conceded that the pursuit of nuclear weapons in the Global South could occasionally be *radicalizing*, but he also hastened to add that its acquisition was, in the end, *deradicalizing*. Radicalism tends to subside once a nuclear status has been achieved since the nuclear state acquires a greater vested interest in the status quo.

But all along, Mazrui (2009: 7) maintained that he was for the total abolition of nuclear weapons. He was for their complete prohibition, not just for some but for everybody. “At the very minimum,” Mazrui (see Adem, Mutunga, and Mazrui 2013: 133) argued, “the world should declare nuclear [warfare] as illegitimate as germ warfare.” Consistent with the view held by the “abolish to abolish” school, Mazrui was convinced that there was no justification for nuclear weapons to continue to enjoy a higher level of respectability anywhere.

It was against this background that Mazrui (1980a: 17–18; 1980b: 134) posed two central questions: What could lead to a global nuclear disarmament? What could shock the major powers into a state of emergency about denuclearization?

Mazrui first observed that the nuclear accident on Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania in the US in 1979 had been instrumental in arousing the anti-nuclear public sentiment more than anything before it. He then proceeded to argue that if a computer error about a Russian nuclear attack was to trigger a limited US response, that, too, could have shocked the population of the great powers to put pressure on their governments to ban nuclear weapons in their totality. And then, he asked: What other less disastrous alternatives could lead to global nuclear disarmament? His answer was deceptively simple: “proliferate to abolish.”

He firmly believed that horizontal nuclear proliferation could provide such an alternative by creating a climate of hopefully manageable crisis. “Of course, horizontal nuclear proliferation has its risks,” Mazrui (1987a: 20) added, “but are those risks really more dangerous than the risks of vertical proliferation in arsenals of the superpowers themselves?”

A major pillar of the idea of “proliferate to abolish” was, therefore, the distrust with which Western powers view nuclear weapons in the Global South. Mazrui (1980a: 18) went on to elucidate:

That distrust could become an asset if the threat of the nuclearization of the Third World creates enough consternation in the Northern Hemisphere to result in a massive international movement to declare nuclear weapons illegitimate for everybody and to put an end to nuclear arsenals in every country that has them ... The 'vaccination' of horizontal nuclear proliferation might be needed to cure the world of this nuclear malaise ...

On what gave rise to the Western distrust of Third World states with nuclear weapons in the first place, Joseph Nye (2023: 16) put it in this way:

Statistics show regions differ in their number of civil wars, overthrown governments, and procedures for civilian control of the military, as well as secure communications and weapons control.

As though in anticipation of Nye's observation above, Mazrui (1986: 182–183) had argued:

The lunatics of the North that we have had in this century are at least as alarming ... We have had the horrors of Hitler and Stalin ... The capacity of planetary destruction in the hands of Northern lunatics is far greater than the capacity that could even be approximated by [Third World] deviants. (Italics added.)

Mazrui was convinced that the action of one mad ruler could lead to such planetary destruction. And "mad rulers are not limited to the Third World," Mazrui (1980c: 79) noted:

... Nixon ordered a worldwide nuclear alert in 1973 – partly in order to recover some dignity in the midst of the Watergate scandal. A ruler like him – under domestic fire – could all too easily take a potentially catastrophic international gamble.

Joseph Nye (2023: 16) was concerned that "... the greater the spread [of nuclear weapons], the greater the risks of blowing up the whole neighborhood." Ali Mazrui saw the same phenomenon—Western distrust of Third World states with nuclear weapons—*positively*, as something that could finally lead to military denuclearization of the world.

It must be reiterated that Mazrui never overlooked the risks associated with nuclear proliferation. The ideal scenario for him was total nuclear disarmament or an initiative toward that end without any additional nuclear stockpile (vertical nuclear proliferation) and additional

membership in the nuclear club (horizontal nuclear proliferation). For Mazrui (1978: 23), however, horizontal nuclear proliferation would lead to “a sufficiently great sense of imminent peril to tilt the judgment in the direction of favoring total denuclearization in the military field everywhere.”

PROLIFERATION IN AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

It was in his BBC Reith Lectures that Ali Mazrui (1979) articulated his desire to see the military nuclearization of Nigeria, Zaire, and a black-ruled South Africa. Mazrui gave three overlapping and interrelated reasons as to why he wanted to see the three African countries militarily nuclearized. The first and most important reason was directly linked to his idea of “proliferate to abolish.” He wanted the three countries to get nuclearized militarily and induce a genuine commitment to total nuclear disarmament. Only then, Mazrui (1982: 251–252) argued, will the world at last address itself to the fundamentals of human survival. Mazrui (1980b: 136) thus insisted there was even a higher purpose that could be served as a result of horizontal nuclear proliferation:

...the best moral case for military democratization in terms of increasing participation in military nuclear technology in the world is whether this democratization will, in turn, ultimately lead to the drastic reduction of large-scale warfare in human affairs.

Secondly, Mazrui (2001: 106) wanted Africa to go nuclear for a dignitarian reason—in its quest for dignity and status, given that only Africans had been subjected to large-scale indignities such as enslavement, lynching, systematic segregation, and well-planned apartheid. It was this collective experience, according to Mazrui (1964: 520), which also laid the basis for the two elements of African nationalism:

One concerns the relations of Africans with the outside world; the other pertains to the relations of Africans with each other. The former includes the fear of being manipulated by non-Africans; the latter comprehends the desire for greater unity among Africans.

From Mazrui’s vantage point, the struggle against the prevailing international military order is, therefore, part and parcel of the quest for dignity and respect. “The road to military equality is first through nuclear

proliferation,” Mazrui (1980c: 79) said, “and later through global denuclearization for everybody.”

Third, Mazrui sought to challenge the assumptions he thought undergird the very birth of NPT, an idea which had ancestral ties to *Pax Britannica*: “... the white races had a duty to disarm the rest of mankind” (Mazrui 1978: 2; also see Mazrui 1987b: 3). Mazrui (1990: 44) went on to claim that it might not be a coincidence that the same “Anglo-Saxons” should be the first to produce nuclear weapons, use nuclear weapons, take the world to the brink of nuclear war and, now, refuse to outlaw nuclear first strike.

Many years after he made the case for Africa’s military nuclearization, Mazrui (1998a: 9) nevertheless lamented:

Nigeria and Zaire have moved further away from being potential nuclear powers ... As for the Republic of South Africa, as soon as the bomb was in danger of falling into Black hands, FW De Klerk, and later Nelson Mandela and his colleagues, were persuaded to sign [the NPT in 1991].

However, Mazrui (1998a: 9) argued that on the eve of the new millennium, the time was ripe for Africa to eschew its “nuclear shyness” now that India and Pakistan have also nuclearized. It is time to “re-open the question as to whether to accept the status quo.”

It must be emphasized that geographically, however, Mazrui (1980a: 18) looked beyond Africa and argued that it was a modest nuclear proliferation in the Middle East or Islamic world, more broadly, that was likely to bring his idea of “proliferate to abolish” to its ultimate fulfillment:

The most dangerous part of the Third World from the point of view of global war is the Middle East. Modest horizontal proliferation in the Middle East would be more dangerous in *global* terms than a slightly higher level of proliferation in Latin America or Africa. This is partly because a regional war in the Middle East carries a greater risk of escalating into a world war than does a regional war in Latin America or Africa.

It was out of the “plutoniumization of Islam” that the impetus for global military denuclearization could emerge (Mazrui 1980a: 180).

Mazrui (1998b) also predicted:

The regime of nuclear apartheid in the twenty-first century will be shaken in three stages. First, by the twin rivalries between India and Pakistan on one side, and between India and China, on the other.

This could include a nuclear arms race in the region as a whole. Second, by the nuclearization of Iran. Third, by the nuclearization of Nigeria and re-nuclearization of South Africa in the twenty-first century.

Mazrui's prediction may or may not be vindicated. But a decade before he shared the above prediction, Mazrui (1989: 158) also said:

If Islam gets nuclearized before the end of the century, two regional rivalries are likely to have played an important part in it. One is the rivalry between India and Pakistan; the other is the rivalry between Israel and the Arabs.

As Mazrui predicted, Pakistan indeed exploded a nuclear device in 1998 and joined the nuclear club.

In general, Mazrui (2006: 173) concluded that the vaccination of “horizontal proliferation” may help cure the disease of “vertical proliferation”:

A nuclearized Islam or a nuclearized Africa can ... [create] the necessary culture shock for a serious international commitment to universal nuclear disarmament. The racial prejudices and cultural distrust of the white members of the nuclear club may well serve the positive function of disbanding the larger group—and dismantling the nuclear arsenals in the cellars which had constituted credentials for membership.

CONCLUSION

In closing, consider the following shocking statistics. In 2019, Princeton University's Science and Global Security Lab estimated that a “limited” nuclear escalation between the US and Russia would lead to the death and injury of more than 90 million people within the first few hours of the conflict (Gault 2019). And according to a Rutgers University climatologist, Alan Robock (as paraphrased in Flam 2022):

... even a “smaller” nuclear war—say, between India and Pakistan—would cause enough global cooling to starve hundreds of millions. In a war that involved Russia and the US, which have more powerful weapons and larger stockpiles, the death toll would likely exceed half the world's population.

Precisely because the above statistics are so shocking, they should change the way we think about nuclear weapons. If they could do that and change the way we think, that would be the most important step we could take toward changing the nuclear paradigm. Startling statistics such as the above also make Ali Mazrui's (1980b: 114) reminder something that cannot be repeated too often:

If one part of the world is not habitable enough politically, the flow of refugees gets underway. But if planet Earth is not habitable enough, we cannot stop it to get off. We cannot become a new race of boat people, floating in outer space ...

It was surely on the basis of this consideration that Mazrui (1987a: 20) was led to place a high premium on the utility of his idea of "proliferate to abolish." As Mazrui (1987a: 20) put it in his inimitable way:

Perhaps until now, the major powers have worried only about 'the wrong weapons in the right hands,' deadly devices under the control of stable hands. This has not been alarming enough to force the major powers into genuine disarmament. When nuclear devices pass into Arab or black African hands, a new nightmare will have arrived—'the wrong weapons in the wrong hands,' deadly weapons controlled by unstable governments. Perhaps that culture shock, that consternation, will, at last, create the necessary political will among the major powers to move [us] toward genuine universal nuclear disarmament.

In other words, it is an engagement by the Global South in a Russian nuclear roulette (horizontal nuclear proliferation) that could force humanity to retreat from destroying itself. That, in short, was Mazrui's idea of "proliferate to abolish."

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