

# The Terrestrial Parochialism of International Relations

Written by John Hickman

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JOHN HICKMAN, MAY 28 2012

If asked, astronomers describe outer space as breathtakingly immense and astonishingly varied. Recent discoveries have revealed the worlds of our solar system to be exotic in the extreme as well as the existence of hundreds of enormous extra-solar planets orbiting neighboring stars. By comparison, international relations scholars have nothing of consequence to say about outer space beyond Earth's orbit, the only region of outer space now being exploited for military, economic and practical social benefit. The rest of the universe is treated as politically irrelevant.

What is striking about the perspective of contemporary International Relations scholars is that it is more today than it was at the beginning of the Space Age, a phrase not heard much these days. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, many well-informed observers expected that, by now, we would occupy bases on the Moon, have landed on Mars and perhaps journeyed as far as the Outer Planets. Their confidence in the imminent Conquest of Space, another phrase rarely heard these days, was shared by students of International Relations. The resulting commentary is notable for the idealism that it expressed.

Some were concerned about the security of any intelligent extraterrestrial beings that humans might encounter. In 1956 Andrew G. Haley, General Counsel of the International Astronautical Federation and Chair of its International Affairs Committee, asserted that something like the Golden Rule should prevail in relationships with extraterrestrial beings as what he termed Metalaw, and that it would be "better to destroy mankind" than have it commit "bleak and devastating geocentric crimes" in outer space.[1]

Many more worried that outer space would be another military battlefield for the competing superpowers, or that the spacefaring superpowers would claim everything in outer space for themselves. The general response was a rather pious internationalism. International legal scholars F.T. Evans and H.D. Howard wrote in 1965 that the development of international organizations meant that our entry in outer space presented the opportunity for humans "to live by law and cooperation rather than force."

### Science Fiction and Soviet Lunar Bases

Internationalism as solution to the problems presented by outer space featured prominently in the science fiction of the period as well. The 1960 joint East German/Polish film *The Silent Star* is an amusing example. With special effects that sometimes achieve a sense of the alien, acting that was as earnest as the script, and a score that owed much to the Hollywood science fiction classic *Forbidden Planet*, the film portrays a post-Cold War near future where international scientific elites must grapple with the mystery posed by a Venusian artifact discovered on Earth. The Soviet Union responds by giving Cosmokrator I, the largest spaceship ever built and originally intended for a mission to Mars, to the International Space Research Federation for the first mission to Venus. The crew will include a brave Russian, a brave German, a brave Pole, a brilliant Chinese, a brilliant Indian, a generic African from an unnamed African country who is also brave, a pretty Japanese doctor emotionally scarred as a survivor of Hiroshima and, the only major character, an American scientist who must beg a repulsive cabal of resentful American leaders that screams "ruling committee of the bourgeoisie" for permission to participate. The following exchange between a stereotypically annoying reporter and the heroic leader of the expedition hammers home the internationalist message.

Reporter: "Why not just a team of Soviet scientists? It's their rocket!"

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Scientist: "Landing on Venus cannot concern only one nation. We are not only internationalists in politics. In a peaceful world we don't keep our successes to ourselves. Take Luna 3 for example, the socialist lunar station. We don't use it as a military base. Engineers and physicists from all nations work there."

One of the consequences of such internationalist sentiment was the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, which achieved a laudable if incomplete demilitarization of outer space while also managing to deprive states of a crucial incentive for funding human exploration of outer space as a frontier.[2] Under the treaty, states are forbidden from claiming national sovereignty over celestial bodies. All of outer space was declared to be an international commons. In language that might be regretted should we ever encounter any of Andrew G. Haley's intelligent extraterrestrial beings, the treaty describes the entire universe beyond Earth to be the "province of mankind."

The absence of a reward for states to fund exploration in the form of new national territory goes a long way toward explaining why today we are confined to visiting the Earth's orbit, unable even to return to the Moon. We now explore only through robots like the Cassini space probe and the Mars Rover. If the current decline in science funding at NASA continues, less virtual exploration will be conducted in the future.

## **Explaining IR's Terrestrial Parochialism**

That nothing recognizably political now occurs beyond Earth's orbit would be sufficient to explain the terrestrial parochialism of contemporary International Relations scholars. However, that perspective is reinforced by three largely unchallenged assumptions: 1) that anything other than pure scientific interest in that realm is silly; 2) that commercial firms will eventually develop any economic potential it may have; 3) and that territorial expansion anywhere by states is dangerously atavistic.

The first two assumptions are evident in news coverage and commentary in the English language press. When U.S. Republican Party presidential candidate Newt Gingrich promised a Moon base to an audience of space industry workers in Florida, in 2012, he was mocked by reporters, pundits and comedians. When the rhetorical outbidding was finished, pundits had moved the object of his proposal all the way from Moon to Pluto.[3] When SpaceX launched its space cargo rocket in May 2012, reporters and pundits heralded it as a triumph of the free market, while typically neglecting to mention the importance of the U.S. government "seed money" subsidy for the development of the spacecraft, the exploitation of rocket technology developed by several national governments over the last half century, the use of former U.S. government launch facilities and trained personnel, the promise of a future U.S. government contract for cargo delivery and, most importantly, a place to deliver the cargo that had been constructed by the U.S. government: the International Space Station. Nor did they dare emphasize that the SpaceX craft would not be travelling anywhere beyond Earth orbit.

The third assumption may remain opaque in popular news coverage, but is present in the thinking of scholars and decision-makers. Over the last four decades, the idea of sovereign national territory was devalued in International Relations scholarship. In 1996, Richard Rosecrance, then Research Professor of Political Science at the University of California, derided the territorial concerns of less developed countries trapped "producing goods that are derived from land" as a "dirt fetish." [4] He lauded developed countries for preferring to "plumb the world market than acquire territory" and predicted that Russia, China and India were destined to remain industrial workshops while downsized 'virtual states' like Singapore and Hong Kong were transcending the production of wealth in tangible form for wealth in an information-rich, intangible form. That the absence of a geographic hinterland makes Singapore and Hong Kong dependent and vulnerable was hardly worth examining in the soaring optimism of the 1990s.

## **A Chinese Annexation of the Moon?**

Speaking at the February 2012 Munich Security Conference, former Australian Minister of Foreign Affairs Kevin Rudd bemoaned the "unresolved security disputes of a territorial nature" in East Asia and South Asia before urging that lessons be learned about achieving security from the experience of post-Second World War and post-Cold War Europe, which were based on acceptance of liberal international norms.[5] One reasonable interpretation is that Rudd was recommending that his Asian counterparts abandon their messy territorial claims because of the benefits

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of peace and free trade. Many in the audience may have been puzzled at that point, why there must be a trade-off between such foreign policy goals, and why Asians would need to learn about security and prosperity from Europeans. Hearing an Australian blithely instruct the Chinese to give up territorial claims probably rankled as well. Where Australia occupies an entire continent and is one of the winners in claiming vast expanses of the ocean surface as Exclusive Economic Zones under the Law of the Sea Treaty, China is geopolitically hemmed in by the other powers and their clients. If European history has anything to teach, it is that powers whose leaders chaff at such geopolitical constraints may seek territorial relief.[6]

Because all of the available land on Earth has been claimed by states, it is easy to overlook the possibility that states might satisfy territorial ambition in a manner other than at the expense of neighboring states. In a recent article in *Astropolitics*, I offered three reasons why Beijing might annex territory around the Moon base that it has planned as Chinese sovereign national territory.[7] Briefly summarized, the argument is that enhanced international prestige, the capacity for strategic surprise, and the escape clause in the 1967 Outer Space Treaty all make such a decision conceivable as a *fait accompli*. Among the likely consequences is that other space-faring states, once they had remonstrated sufficiently, would be motivated to revitalize their space programs so as not to be left out of the process of lunar territorial aggrandizement. What is more, if the Moon can be annexed as sovereign national territory then so could other celestial bodies.

One certain casualty of a Chinese annexation of territory on the Moon would be that students of International Relations would be compelled to abandon their parochial terrestrial perspective. Outer space, beyond Earth's orbit would be politically relevant once again, and this in a manner more meaningful than as the object of idealistic internationalism.

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[1] Andrew G. Haley. "Space Law and Metalaw – A Synoptic View." A Paper Presented at the 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the International Astronautical Federation, Rome, Italy, September 19, 1956.

[2] John Hickman. 2010. *Reopening the Space Frontier*. Champaign IL: Common Ground. Pp. 84-91.

[3] Scott Simon. "GOP Primary Season: Helpful or Harmfully Long?" *NPR Weekend Edition*. March 24, 2012. <http://www.npr.org/2012/03/24/149284355/gop-primary-season-helpful-or-harmfully-long> Retrieved March 27, 2012.

[4] Richard Rosecrance. 1996. "The Rise of the Virtual State." *Foreign Affairs*. Vol. 75. Pp. 45-61.

[5] Kevin Rudd. 2012. Remarks to the 'America, Europe and the Rise of Asia' of the Munich Security Conference. [http://foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2012/kr\\_sp\\_120204.html](http://foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2012/kr_sp_120204.html) Retrieved March 5, 2012.

[6] Holger W. Herwig. 1980. *"Luxury" Fleet: The Imperial German Navy, 1888-1918*. London: George Allen & Unwin. p. 35.

[7] John Hickman. 2012. "How Plausible is Chinese Annexation of territory on the Moon?" *Astropolitics*. Vol. 10. Pp. 84-92.

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