

The Marshall Islands and U.S. Imperial Relations

Oceania

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Abstract: The United States has detonated dozens of atomic bombs in the atolls of the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) which have affected the livelihood and health of both the Marshallese people and their land. This paper analyzes this event and its aftermath, including the overarching theme of U.S.-RMI relations as exemplary of American neo-imperialism and their subsequent client state relationship based on economic and military dependency. The notion that the U.S. has violated the human rights of the Marshallese people according to the UN Declaration of Human Rights is also explored, as well as the use of foreign policy as an instrument for expanding America's modern empire and sphere of influence in the Asia-Pacific region. The

U.S. perpetuates its disregard for Marshallese's human rights by dismissing those still affected by the nuclear tests, in addition to continued military testing on the islands. These theories draw on evidence from peer-reviewed journal articles, news articles, and documents from official government sources.

Introduction

The relationship between the Marshall Islands and the United States is one marred by the U.S.'s excessive military testing in the islands' atolls, as well as the infractions by the U.S. upon the human rights of the Marshallese. The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) is a sovereign country in free association with the United States, located in the Pacific halfway between Australia and Hawai'i. Before the Americans reached the islands, the RMI endured periods of colonization by Spain and Germany from the 16th to the 19th century, along with a brief occupation by Japan during the two World Wars. The Marshall Islands were soon administered by the U.S. on behalf of the United Nations after entering the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands in 1947. The RMI later left the trusteeship in 1979 with the ratification of its Constitution and finally gained independence as a sovereign country in 1986

following the signing the Compact of Free Association (COFA) with the United States (Nitijela Parliament). While the RMI was in trusteeship and politically administered by the U.S., the latter conducted dozens of nuclear tests in and around the Marshall Islands, causing irrevocable damage to the environment, the people and their livelihood. The U.S. has violated the Marshallese people's human rights by detonating atomic and hydrogen bombs among the RMI's atolls without first evacuating the Marshallese out of the areas who were in the predicted path of nuclear fallout, the effects of which are still seen today among the people and the land. Additionally, the RMI has been rendered a client state due to American neo-imperialism, as the RMI is obligated to act within the bounds of COFA, a policy covertly intended to serve American interests.

Background and Consequences of the Nuclear Testing

Between 1946 and 1958, when the RMI was in trusteeship and governed by the U.S., the United States “detonated sixty-seven nuclear weapons over the atolls of Bikini and Enewetak in the Marshall Islands” (Gerrard 2015, 87). The “Bravo” test was detonated on Bikini atoll and was the largest nuclear test out of the dozens conducted on the islands, the fallout of which blew to the neighboring atolls of Rongelap and Utirik (Kupferman 2011, 77). While the Marshallese who lived on Bikini and Enewetak atolls were forced to relocate to accommodate the testing, those who lived on the neighboring atolls that received nuclear fallout were not evacuated, which may have been an intentional decision. Kupferman notes that although the U.S. has officially denied that it knew of the nuclear fallout pattern before Bravo, many in the RMI believe that the U.S. purposely did not

evacuate the Marshallese as they sought to study the effects of fallout exposure on humans. Not only were there dire health consequences as a direct result of the nuclear tests such as burns, birth defects, and cancers, the Rongelap and Utirik atolls also became uninhabitable (Zak 2015; Kupferman 2011, 78). From the 1960s through the ‘80s, though atolls like Enewetak were still partially uninhabitable and “most of the remaining land had become unsuitable for growing food” (Gerrard 2015, 89), the U.S. “unsuccessfully tried to return the nuclear-affected islanders to their home islands” (Kupferman 2011, 78). One of the likely reasons for the unsuccessful homecoming is the U.S. Defense Department’s decision to allow radioactive waste to be bulldozed into a lagoon, dumped into a crater that was made by one of their bombs, and covered with a concrete dome — despite objections to these disposal methods from the Environmental Protection

Agency. Later studies have shown that these methods were not effective in preventing radioactive material from seeping into groundwater and the environment — in fact, inspections conducted in 2013 have revealed that the dome is deteriorating and will likely be submerged by seawater in the near future. The U.S.’s method of carelessly dumping nuclear waste seems to strictly occur outside the American states, as the “government follows profoundly different procedures for disposal of radioactive waste at home than in the Marshall Islands” (Gerrard 2015, 89-90).

American Infringement Upon Marshallese Human Rights

The conscious decisions to not evacuate the Marshallese out of the atolls near the two nuclear test sites and to not properly dispose of harmful radioactive waste that resulted from these tests highlights the U.S.’s violation of the human rights of the Marshallese. In the United

Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) — which was published two years after the U.S. started its nuclear testing in the RMI — Article 25 states that “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control” (United Nations 1948, 76). The U.S. had already dropped two atomic bombs during World War II and likely knew of the immediate and long-term effects of using these weapons, so it is suspicious as to why the U.S. did not predict nuclear fallout to sweep across the Rongelap and Utrik atolls. The U.S.’s purposeful lack of foresight on this matter, as well as the insufficient radioactive waste “cleanup” effort, has directly violated Marshallese’s

right to living standards adequate for their health and well-being.

U.S. Dismissal and the RMI's Response

It helps the American cause that the RMI has no Congressional representation nor much international political power to force the U.S. to clean up its mess, however this is not to say that the RMI has not tried. In April 2014, the Marshall Islands “filed suits against the United States and other nuclear powers claiming failure to meet their obligations under Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty,” though one year later, California’s federal court “granted the USG’s motion to dismiss the lawsuit brought against it by the RMI” (U.S. Department of State 2015, 1). The reasoning behind the dismissal was that the suit “lacked standing to sue and the case presented a ‘political question’ not appropriate for resolution in U.S. courts” (Armbruster 2015, 12). While the U.S. has stated that it has “paid full and final

compensation for the nuclear tests,” the RMI continues to seek the U.S. to be held accountable for its actions and “contends that Congress should review the compensation due to ‘changed circumstances’ and evidence about the tests that has come to light since the compensation package was awarded” (Armbruster 2015, 12). Under the Compact of Free Association (COFA), a Nuclear Claims Tribunal was established to further determine monetary matters related to the nuclear tests. The tribunal determined that over \$2 billion in damages should be awarded to those affected by the testing and subsequently petitioned U.S. Congress to meet this request, though the Supreme Court has refused to take the case and Congress has yet to respond (Gerrard 2015, 94). Denying further compensation to those who have been affected by the U.S.’s nuclear tests and the subsequent insufficient disposal constitute the U.S.’s violation of the

UNDHR, as it is blocking many Marshallese from their right to security in the event of sickness, disability, or other lack of livelihood that developed due to the tests and/or improper nuclear dumping.

COFA and the Client State Relationship

Not only are there grounds for a human rights violation, but the U.S. has also used its neo-imperial power to render the Marshall Islands an American client state. The U.S.'s main instrument of neo-imperialism is in the form of foreign policy with the RMI, namely the Compact of Free Association, or COFA. While the RMI is a sovereign nation and its government can manage its foreign relations, it must adhere to COFA's (i.e. America's) terms.

According to the Central Intelligence Agency, the Marshall Islands does not maintain a regular military force — instead, the U.S. “has full authority and responsibility for security and defense of the Marshall Islands,” and thus “the

Government of the Marshall Islands is obligated to refrain from taking actions that would be incompatible with these security and defense responsibilities” (U.S. Department of State 2015, 2). Essentially, COFA is a contract that has covertly locked the RMI into a subordinate financial and military relationship with the U.S. The original 1986 Compact “was intended to provide 15 years of financial support to the RMI” for the islands to “strengthen local economies and decrease dependence on the U.S.” (Kupferman 2011, 76), however, the Compact has had the opposite effect. Ever since its implementation, the RMI has “struggled to create viable economic ventures that would provide the revenue the country would need to sustain itself” past the year 2001, and it was reported that “almost all attempts at government-subsidised business failed” (Kupferman 2011, 78). The unsuccessful financial efforts of the Compact inevitably led to the next

step: extending COFA beyond 2001. The renewed and amended Compact II, signed in 2003, varies from the original on the premise that the amended version involves “decreasing grants and increasing loans over its 20-year lifespan” (Kupferman 2011, 76). It is still unclear whether Compact II will require another extension after 2023, as it will depend on the RMI’s economic progress and its degree of financial dependency on the U.S.

COFA and Neo-imperialism

Another major component of COFA is the military agreement, which states that the U.S. is responsible for providing defense to the RMI. It also has the right to “deny military use of the islands to other nations as it sees fit” and has “exclusive access to the Kwajalein atoll military installation,” which the U.S. uses for its Strategic Defense Initiative missile defense program (Kupferman 2011, 77). It currently has a lease on the Kwajalein atoll — which will

continue until 2066, if not 2086 — despite claims from the landowners on the atoll that “the rightful end of the lease with the US” was in 2016 (Kupferman 2011, 87). Not only do the Marshall Islands have to rely almost entirely upon the American military for security, the exploitative military (and financial) relationship “continues indefinitely” until COFA is mutually terminated: while the Compact provides the Marshall Islands with monetary support, it simultaneously keeps American military forces and test sites on the islands that will continue to inflict damage on the Marshall Islands’ environment (Kupferman 2011, 77). Thus, the RMI may be a sovereign country in name but is a client state on paper, as the Department of State has publicly stated that the Marshall Islands Government cannot act in a way that would conflict with the terms outlined in the Compact. Scholars have “judged the compacts as ‘instruments of U.S. imperialism’ because Washington

primarily secured military-strategic interests” with the RMI (Pöllath 2018, 241), further reinforcing the American sphere of influence in the Pacific.

Conclusion

U.S.-Marshall Islands relations stretch back at least 70 years and is legally bound to continue far into the future. The American presence in the islands has largely been a negative one, with its implementation of 67 nuclear tests, the subsequent fallout among the atolls of the RMI — the (radioactive) effects of which can still be seen today — and the careless dumping of nuclear waste in the islands. By failing to protect the health and safety of the Marshallese people who were helpless in the path of fallout, the U.S. has violated Article 25 of the UNDHR, which states a person’s right to an adequate standard of living and well-being. Additionally, by refusing to respond to compensation petitions by the Nuclear Claims Tribunal, the U.S. continues

to deny security for those who are still affected by the environmental and health impacts of its nuclear testing. The RMI’s political freedom is also under restraint due to its Compact of Free Association with the United States which essentially keeps the Marshall Islands “partially integrated in America’s informal empire” (Pöllath 2018, 246). The financial and military terms of the Compact have trapped the RMI into a subordinate relationship with the U.S., in which the island nation is wholly dependent on American assistance to provide for its economy and security. The U.S. benefits from this client state relationship as it can continue exploiting the land to further their military testing, as well as maintain a base point in the Pacific to potentially deter threatening and rising powers in the Asia-Pacific region, such as North Korea and China. While the U.S. maintains a formidable presence in Guam and Samoa, the Marshall Islands is another Pacific

nation that has been effectively colonized
and infringed upon through covert tools of
American neo-imperialism.

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