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978-1-107-02135-8 - Special Responsibilities: Global Problems and American Power
Mlada Bukovansky, Ian Clark, Robyn Eckersley, Richard Price, Christian Reus-Smit and
Nicholas J. Wheeler

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Introduction

During his visit to China in November 2009, US President Barack Obama gave a joint press conference along with China's President Hu Jintao. In his statement, Obama identified three major global problems: nuclear proliferation, climate change and economic recovery from the global financial crisis. Their common feature, he insisted, was that none could be solved by either state acting alone. He therefore welcomed China's greater role, 'a role in which a growing economy is joined by growing responsibilities'.¹ This emphasised the seeming proportionality between the material resources enjoyed by a state, and the scale of responsibilities it was required to shoulder. It explicitly brought together one view of international politics, as rooted in material resources, with an importantly different view, as rooted in social responsibilities.

There are four interesting dimensions to this statement. First it specified those key global problems in particular. Second it attempted to address them by an explicit appeal to responsibility. Third it assumed that increased responsibilities flow from greater material resources. Fourth it attempted to (re)allocate these responsibilities to reflect those new material distributions.

This was no isolated pronouncement. The language of world politics has become thoroughly suffused with responsibility talk: states are deemed not merely actors in some quasi-mechanical international system, but also as the bearers of responsibilities in an international society. Their interests and their ability to realise them are shaped as much by the latter as by the former. Moreover, some actors are widely claimed to carry special responsibilities that set them apart. Such notions can be found even at a popular level. When asked in a survey conducted at the end of 2010 if the United States had a 'special responsibility to be the leading nation in world affairs', 66 per cent of Americans polled

¹ 'President Obama delivers joint press statement with President Hu Jintao of China', *Washington Post*, 17 November 2009, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/11/17/AR2009111701090.html?sid=ST2009111700768 (accessed 27 July 2011).

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answered in the affirmative.² In order to establish immediately the importance of this topic, let us briefly eavesdrop on this responsibility talk, as drawn from the discussion of those three global problems identified by Obama.

The topic of nuclear proliferation has long been dominated by special responsibility talk. A distinctive responsibility in this area has been widely accepted by various US administrations in the past, although often said to be shared with Russia, or with the other nuclear weapon states (NWSs) more generally. Thomas D'Agostino, Administrator of the US National Nuclear Security Administration under President George W. Bush, had already attested that 'the US has a special responsibility in advancing nonproliferation and nuclear security globally', even if it could not deliver these goals on its own.³ Commonly, Russia has been identified as sharing this responsibility. In 2008, Republican presidential candidate John McCain argued that '[a]s our two countries possess the overwhelming majority of the world's nuclear weapons, we have a special responsibility to reduce their number'.⁴ This view was confirmed by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on the signing of the latest Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty agreement with Russia in April 2010 which, she said, reflected the 'special responsibilities that the United States and Russia bear as the two largest nuclear powers'.⁵ Susan F. Burk, the administration's ambassador for non-proliferation, allocates this 'special responsibility for pursuing nuclear disarmament' to the NWSs generally, but insists also that the 'non-nuclear weapons states share this responsibility under Article VI'.⁶ In what sense the NWSs can have a *special* responsibility, but one that is at the same time *shared* with the non-nuclear weapon states (NNWSs), is itself an intriguing question.

Likewise, the policy issue of climate change has for many years been powerfully organised by a discourse about the allocation of

² J. M. Jones, 'Americans see US as exceptional; 37% doubt Obama does', Gallup, 22 December 2010, www.gallup.com/poll/145358 (accessed 27 July 2011).

³ T. D'Agostino, 'Reducing the global nuclear threat: nuclear non-proliferation and the role of the international community', presentation to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, 18 September 2008, www.nti.org/e_research/source_docs/us/departement_energy/national_nuclear_security_administration/10.pdf (accessed 27 July 2011).

⁴ J. McCain, 'Remarks at the University of Denver', Denver, 27 May 2008, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=77369#axzz1TGGuqlhn (accessed 27 July 2011).

⁵ H. Clinton, 'Implementing a nuclear arms strategy for the 21st century', 7 April 2010, malta.usembassy.gov/arms.html (accessed 27 July 2011).

⁶ S. Burk, 'Toward a successful NPT Review Conference', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, 31 March 2010, carnegieendowment.org/even ts/?fa=eventDetail&id=2841&solr_hilite=Burk+Susan (accessed 27 July 2011).

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responsibilities. The principles underpinning this were set out in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and its related Kyoto Protocol. However, with the adoption of a more activist policy under the Obama administration, there has been a renewed acceptance of responsibilities by the United States, even if these are not to be singularly borne. Shortly after being appointed as Obama's special envoy on climate change, Todd Stern affirmed that the 'United States recognizes our unique responsibility' on this issue, and attributed its source both to America's record as 'the largest historic emitter of greenhouse gases', and also on account of America's endowment 'with important human, financial, and technological capabilities and resources'.⁷ US Secretary of Commerce, Gary Locke, when speaking in China in the company of the US Secretary of Energy, Steven Chu, likewise acknowledged that 'as the two biggest emitters of carbon dioxide, the United States and China have a special responsibility to take action'.⁸ Unsurprisingly, the official website of Friends of the Earth concurred:

We believe that as the world's biggest historical global warming polluter, and as a wealthy nation with considerable resources, the United States has a special responsibility to lead the world in finding equitable solutions to the climate crisis.⁹

What is so striking about all this talk is its explicit adoption of the language of special responsibilities, as well as its various attributions, assignments and acceptance of these responsibilities by a surprisingly diverse range of actors. Notable also are the range of reasons asserted for those special responsibilities, as well as their profoundly differing implications for the onus of undertaking future action. Do responsibilities arise because of retrospective contributions to the problem, or because of prospective resources for finding a solution?

This very same language is readily discernible in discussions about global finance. As might be expected, the recent global financial crisis has evinced a plethora of responsibility talk, within which some special responsibilities have roundly been assigned to the United States. For example, in one unusually blunt statement, the European Commission called upon the United States to 'take responsibility'. By way of

⁷ T. Stern quoted in 'New day dawns for US global warming', *Environment News Service*, 30 March 2009, www.ens-newswire.com/ens/mar2009/2009-03-30-01.asp (accessed 27 July 2011).

⁸ G. Locke quoted in 'US commerce, energy secretaries highlight cooperation with China on climate change', Xinhua News Agency, 6 July 2009, www.china.org.cn/environment/news/2009-07/16/content_18146470.htm (accessed 27 July 2011).

⁹ Friends of the Earth, www.foe.org/international-work (accessed 27 July 2011).

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explanation, it suggested that the ‘turmoil we are facing has originated in the United States. It has become a global problem. The US has a special responsibility in this situation.’¹⁰ Elsewhere, US Secretary of the Treasury, Timothy Geithner, has admitted to the need for US action to maintain the value of the US dollar, on account of its ‘special responsibility for being a source of stability and strength in the global economy’,¹¹ while President Obama acknowledged the somewhat different ‘special responsibility’ held by the US ‘as one of the world’s financial centers, to work with partners around the globe to reform a failed regulatory system’.¹² On this latter theme, Geithner and European Union Commissioner for Internal Market and Services, Michel Barnier, were subsequently able to agree that ‘the United States and the European Union, as the world’s two largest economies and financial systems, have a special responsibility to promote and implement stronger global financial standards’.¹³ Once again, the substance, sources and allocation of responsibilities were central to the post-financial crisis diagnosis of what needs to be done to fix the global system.

What is the significance of all this responsibility talk? Is it no more than a rhetorical adornment to conceal the naked power politics underneath? Is the stated allocation of those responsibilities simply a reflection of the existing distribution of material power, and intended as one way of reproducing it? Are reallocations of special responsibilities little more than an acknowledgement of ongoing changes in that distribution? Alternatively, could it be that this language of responsibility actually helps to shape a distribution of power in a more fundamentally social sense?

This book enters upon the first explicit and sustained engagement with the notion of special responsibilities in world politics. It is, however, much more than a work of conceptual clarification: it also offers a

¹⁰ Quoted in L. Phillips, ‘US must take responsibility for global crisis, Brussels says’, *euobserver.com*, 30 September 2008, euobserver.com/9/26835 (accessed 27 July 2011).

¹¹ T. Geithner quoted in G. Somerville, ‘Geithner stresses strong dollar’s global role’, Reuters, 12 November 2009, www.reuters.com/article/2009/11/12/us-apec-idUSTRE5AA0IB20091112 (accessed 27 July 2011).

¹² ‘Video and transcript: President Obama’s remarks at the Summit of the Americas (17 April)’, *EAWorldView*, 20 April 2009, www.enduringamerica.com/april-2009/2009/4/20/video-and-transcript-president-obamas-remarks-at-the-summit.html (accessed 27 July 2011).

¹³ ‘Joint statement by US Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner and EU Commissioner Michel Barnier on the financial reform agenda’, EU/NR 22/10, 12 May 2010, www.eurunion.org/eu/2010-News-Releases/JOINT-STATEMENT-BY-UNITED-STATES-TREASURY-SECRETARY-TIMOTHY-GEITHNER-AND-EUROPEAN-UNION-COMMISSIONER-MICHEL-BARNIER-ON-THE-FINANCIAL-REFORM-AGENDA.html (accessed 27 July 2011).

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key insight into one important facet of those politics. Although the language of special responsibilities has become pervasive, both in practitioner and theoretical accounts, it has nowhere previously been subject to systematic examination and explication. As a group of scholars with a continuing interest in the role of international legitimacy, we saw the opportunity to develop our general understanding of legitimacy, and of the social power to which it gives rise, by a specific discussion of this concept.¹⁴ Accordingly, our treatment of special responsibilities arises as one instance of international legitimacy more generally, insofar as they represent one variant form through which legitimacy comes to be practised. Just as international legitimacy is generally affected by material power relations, but manages still to serve as an autonomous influence on agent behaviour, so it will be argued that special responsibilities reflect existing distributions of material power, while at the same time also reconfiguring the social relations of power within its sundry policy domains. In this way, the contestation over special responsibilities represents one particularly good illustration of the contestation over principles of legitimacy more generally, and serves to track their historical evolution. The allocation of special responsibilities operates in this way, above all, through its unique compromise between the principles of equality and differentiation, and by its ongoing negotiation between the two.

Equality and differentiation

Every dimension of international politics – political, legal and moral – faces the challenge of reconciling the two principles of equality and differentiation. The first articulates a claim to equality, and stresses what all states share in common, including enjoyment of the same rights and responsibilities within the existing international order. This idea is most clearly captured in the modern doctrine of sovereignty, especially in the sovereign equality that it is thought necessarily to entail: it is in the very identity of their legal capacity that the equality of all states resides. The second articulates instead a principle of differentiated status, adopted to enhance the efficient working of international order, but often at the

¹⁴ M. Bukovansky, *Legitimacy and power politics: The American and French revolutions in international political culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); I. Clark, *Legitimacy in international society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); I. Clark, *Hegemony in international society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); I. Clark and C. Reus-Smit (eds.), 'Resolving international crises of legitimacy', *International Politics*, 44(2/3) 2007, 153–339; C. Reus-Smit, *American power and world order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

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behest of the strongest parties to entrench their own position.¹⁵ This is best demonstrated in the acknowledgement of the differential legal and practical entitlements to which unequal capabilities have given rise. As one powerful example reveals, the United Nations Charter was itself a ‘compromise between ... the “special responsibility” of the Great Powers ... and the juridical commitment to equality’.¹⁶ This is a characteristic of special responsibilities across the board.

Special responsibilities come to the fore in a world characterised by two opposed sets of conditions. These range along a spectrum bounded by the normative structure of sovereign equality at one end, and the pure play of inequalities of material power at the other. Special responsibilities are therefore one potential political modality, set against what would otherwise likely happen at these two extremes. The first is characterised by formal sovereign equality, a form of legal egalitarianism central to the post-1945 international institutional order. This modality is often cast as essential to alleviating several of the more pronounced challenges to international cooperation, and it is deeply embedded in contemporary forms of multilateralism. The second is characterised by the free play of power politics, depicting a classic ‘realist’ world, driven wholly by inequalities in material power. Special responsibilities occupy the broad middle ground of the spectrum insofar as they attempt to mediate between the more thorough-going social condition of sovereign equality at one end, and raw material hierarchies at the other.

There are therefore two distinct senses in which ‘differentiation’ comes into play in this book. In the first, it simply denotes the inequalities in material power. Second, however, it maps the allocation of social roles, and a central point of the analysis is how these two senses of differentiation are related to each other. Towards the pole of sovereign equality, special responsibilities can be allocated on a wide range of social and normative principles, going well beyond considerations of the distribution of material power alone. Towards the pole of material power politics (as in the position of Kenneth Waltz outlined below), the differentiation in power becomes identical to the differentiation in role. In practice, special responsibilities have been elaborated and allocated in a world that reflects both of those competing pulls, resulting

¹⁵ A good discussion of this dynamic tension can be found in N. Krisch, ‘More equal than the rest? Hierarchy, equality and US predominance in international law’, in M. Byers and G. Nolte (eds.), *United States hegemony and the foundations of international law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 135–75.

¹⁶ G. Simpson, *Great powers and outlaw states: Unequal sovereigns in the international legal order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 167.

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in considerable divergence between the two types of differentiation at one end of the spectrum (sovereign equality), but a total convergence between them at the other (material inequality).

Neither of the alternative modalities at the two extremes has proved sufficiently robust for actually dealing with global problems. This is because sovereign equality finds it hard to articulate the sense in which any states are 'special', whereas material inequality struggles to give meaningful content to the notion of 'responsibilities'. As such, the tendency instead has been to look for some middle position: special responsibilities occupy that ground, but continue always to experience strong pulls towards one pole or the other. A central contention we make is that ideas and practices of special responsibilities come to the fore, and assume particular political importance, in international orders where either sovereign equality or material power politics, each on its own, provides an inadequate basis on which to address challenges of coexistence and cooperation. So special responsibilities arise when unilateral imposition of material power fails, but so too does bargaining amongst formal equals, leading instead to a search for a hierarchical but socially grounded politics of responsibility.

It is this generic dialogue between principles of equality, on the one hand, and principles of differentiation, on the other, that is so central to the talk about responsibilities in world politics, and to the special responsibilities that are thought to attach to particular actors. These have become international society's preferred way of attempting to navigate between the two competing principles. In order to promote multilateralism and cooperation between states, it has been necessary to adopt the formal device of equality, thereby to confirm that all participants stand on an equal footing. At the same time, in the face of bitter experience, it has long been understood that those states most capable of obstructing international cooperation are exactly those that wield the most material power. In consequence, the search for effective international organisation has pushed towards increasingly formal acknowledgement of the different contributions that various states might make. These twin elements constantly recur in the diverse discussions of the balance of power (and the particular role assigned within it to the great powers), in international legal theory, in the practical construction of various international organisations and also in normative debates about the perceived tensions between 'cosmopolitan' egalitarianism and 'communitarian' special responsibilities.¹⁷

¹⁷ A. Abizadeh and P. Gilabert, 'Is there a genuine tension between cosmopolitan egalitarianism and special responsibilities?', *Philosophical Studies*, 138(3) 2008, 349–65.

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It is with a sharp focus on this tension that special responsibilities are best approached, as they immediately begin to pull in those two opposing directions. This can be clearly illustrated with reference to international law. In this context, the idea of responsibility above all emphasises equality, since all states are thought to be equally responsible, in the sense of answerable, for their international legal commitments and obligations. Indeed, without some assumption of the responsibility of all states, it is hard to see how any concept of international law could pertain at all. According to international legal authorities, responsibility is a 'necessary corollary' of the equality of states: state equality is constituted by this common responsibility, insofar as all are equally answerable and accountable under the law.¹⁸ In that sense, responsibility equates directly with the principle of sovereign equality.

In contrast, however, major works of International Relations (IR) theory regard special responsibilities as a kind of differentiation, rooted in profound material inequalities. The classical statement of this has been provided by Waltz: '[I]n any realm populated by units that are functionally similar but of different capability', he tells us, 'those of greatest capability take on special responsibilities.'¹⁹ Waltz is famously reticent about the degree of differentiation and specialisation that occurs in international politics. It is one essential feature of anarchy, as an organising principle, that it is applicable to like units: their 'sameness' is bound up with the fact that they are 'not formally differentiated by the functions they perform'.²⁰ On the face of it, such a notion contradicts any allocation of special responsibilities. At the same time, Waltz clearly recognises that units are not alike in all respects, since some are manifestly more capable than others. Accordingly, he readily accepts that in a self-help system, '[g]reat tasks can be accomplished only by agents of great capability'.²¹ As a result, the units are not 'identical', and some 'specialization by function' develops, issuing in a basic 'division of labor'.²² For Waltz, then, special responsibilities simply capture this division of labour, and roles are arrogated on the basis of the existing distribution of material capabilities: this distribution necessarily exists independently of, and precedes, the resulting division of labour. There is absolutely no suggestion here that special responsibilities are allocated on any other principle, nor, in turn, are they considered to be

¹⁸ A. Pellet, 'The definition of responsibility in international law', in J. Crawford, A. Pellet and S. Olleson (eds.), *The law of international responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 4.

¹⁹ K. N. Waltz, *Theory of international politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), p. 198.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 93. ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 109. ²² *Ibid.*, pp. 114, 105.

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a potential source of the (re)distribution of power. Even more fundamentally, the very notion of ‘responsibilities’ is itself vacuous, since it employs a social concept to refer to an inherently asocial condition.

However, if it is true – as international lawyers commonly attest – that ‘no responsibility, no law’, then at least from the eighteenth century onwards international politics was coming to be regarded also as a game of responsibility, and not exclusively as one of capability. This raised further issues of whether this responsibility could be differentially allocated, and if so, on which principles this might appropriately be done. The result of this evolution was a progressive movement away from assigning roles to various actors, merely in accordance with their existing material capabilities, and towards a new outcome in which this allocation became an important source of social power in its own right. By this we mean that the distribution of responsibilities (and not just the distribution of material capabilities) is constitutive of structures of political power.

In one such elaboration of the role played by responsibility in the international legal order, it is said that ‘responsibility is at the heart of international law ... [I]t constitutes an essential part of what may be considered the constitution of the international community’.²³ Within such a world of equality, all states share the very same responsibility, and this is what makes it possible to refer to them collectively as composing an international community in the first place. In Waltz’s world, in contrast, the condition of material inequality results in a differentiation of responsibilities: however, those that are special are simply ‘taken on’ by those of greatest capability, not socially conferred: there is no suggestion that they are recognised by anyone else. In sum, we are then presented with one view of responsibility that is socially derived, but also with another in which special responsibilities are rooted in material capabilities alone.

It is this seeming tension that lies at the heart of the following study: on the one hand is the formal recognition of the equal status of all state actors, while on the other is the practical acknowledgement of the differentiation that results from varying capabilities. In this volume, we therefore present special responsibilities as a *via media* between those balance-of-power understandings, on the one hand, and those sovereignty-equality understandings, on the other, neither of which accurately describes how international society has responded historically to the global problems it has faced: the former wholly neglects the manifest politics of special responsibilities, and the latter the significant impact

²³ Pellet, ‘The definition of responsibility’, p. 3.

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of inequalities of material power. Accordingly, we emphasise a middle way that relies upon a hierarchical approach to tackling global problems, but in which a differentiation of responsibilities is not simply a byproduct of the existing differentiation in material power.

This development can be illustrated, for example, in the evolution of the very idea of sovereignty. If its initial emphasis was entirely upon sovereign equality, then there has more recently been a pronounced – if deeply contested – trend towards the more textured idea of sovereignty as responsibility.²⁴ While formal equality recognised the importance of responsibility, it was ill-equipped to provide a convincing principle for its differential allocation. Differentiation in social roles, in contrast, is much more conducive to the allocation of *special* responsibilities, and to a more complex elaboration of their nature. In turn, of course, it gives rise also to competing accounts of which principles of differentiation are most appropriate.

To this extent, our study draws upon general tenets of constructivist IR.²⁵ Specifically, it shares the commitment to the importance of the ‘distribution of ideas’ in the system.²⁶ In important ways, this provides the ‘constitution of international society’, and above all represents ‘a set of norms, mutually agreed upon by polities who are members of the society, that define the holders of authority and their prerogatives’.²⁷ Special responsibilities have been one principal instrumentality for conferring that authority, and the prerogatives associated with it. International society has sought to allocate special responsibilities to enhance predictability about behaviour, and so contribute to international order.²⁸ In doing so, it has elaborated a structure of ideas, the most important characteristic of which is that it generates ‘differential capacities’.²⁹ As such, it is a source of social power.

Already we have the beginnings of two radically different mappings of special responsibilities, and our task is to develop a sensible integration

²⁴ F. M. Deng *et al.*, *Sovereignty as responsibility: Conflict management in Africa*. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1996); B. Jones, C. Pascual and S. J. Stedman, *Power and responsibility: Building international order in an era of transnational threats* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2009).

²⁵ See I. Hurd, ‘Constructivism’, in C. Reus-Smit and D. Snidal (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of international relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 298–316.

²⁶ A. Wendt, *Social theory of international politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 96.

²⁷ D. Philpott, *Revolutions in sovereignty: How ideas shaped modern international relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 11–12.

²⁸ T. Hopf, ‘The promise of constructivism in international relations theory’, *International Security*, 23(1) 1998, 178.

²⁹ M. Barnett and R. Duvall, ‘Power in global governance’, in M. Barnett and R. Duvall (eds.), *Power in global governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 18.