

Horror and Hope: (re)presenting militarised children in global North–South relations

KATRINA LEE-KOO

ABSTRACT This article examines the (re)presentations of militarised children in contemporary global politics. In particular, it looks at the iconic image of the 21st century's child soldier, the subject of which is constructed as a menacing yet pitiable product of the so-called new wars of the global South. Yet this familiar image is a small, one-dimensional and selective (re)presentation of the issues facing children who are associated with conflict and militarism. In this sense it is a problematic focal point for analysing the insecurity and human rights of children in and around conflict. Instead, this article argues that the image of the child soldier asserts an important influence in its effect upon global North–South relations. It demonstrates how the image of the child soldier can assist in constructing knowledge about the global South, and the global North's obligations to it, either through programmes of humanitarianism, or through war.

In 2009 the Australian Defence Force (ADF) launched a campaign known as the 'Gap Year Challenge'. This programme was designed to encourage Australian high school leavers, typically aged between 16 and 18, to spend one year experiencing life in either the Australian Army or the Royal Australian Navy. Promotional material for the programme promises an action-packed year of independence from home life, exercise, adventure and skills training. It proffers a safe and supervised space where children can become adults.¹ Offering an income of over AUS\$40 000 per year, it is also a programme which, for an average school leaver, could be considered well remunerated.² The programme's website uses a banner image of a young man in army fatigues, a helmet and safety rope scaling an indoor rock climbing wall. He is looking up into the camera with bright eyes and a wide smile. The suggestion that you can scale new heights in a fun, safe and supervised manner, while making new friends and trying out military life is the theme of

Katrina Lee-Koo is in the School of Politics and International Relations, Australian National University, Canberra 0200 ACT, Australia. Email: Katrina.LeeKoo@anu.edu.au

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the Gap Year Challenge. The programme is designed to capture a market of young Australians unsure of what they want to do with their lives, and encourage them to consider a life in the defence forces. In this way the programme is not dissimilar to previous or concurrent programs designed to attract young recruits into the defence forces of other developed nations.³ Yet, while it may be commonplace, at a basic level it represents a process of militarising youth by seeking to imbue children with the values, practices and training regimes of militarism.

The fun-loving, adventure seeking youth represented in the ADF campaign advertisement is in stark contrast to the usual portrayal of children associated with militarism. In particular, collective discursive framing of the issue by the children and armed conflict advocacy network⁴—through the use of images, language, testimony and anecdotal and quantitative evidence—presents the militarisation of children as unacceptable. A collective example of this activism is the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (hereafter the Coalition). It is a leading multi-organisational NGO that involves Human Rights Watch, the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), Amnesty International, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and others. Using a combination of commissioned research, reports and advocacy to raise awareness of the issue of child soldiering, it works towards ending the recruitment of children into military forces and seeks to secure their demobilisation worldwide.⁵ In its *Global Reports*, published every four years, the Coalition demonstrates and condemns the breadth of military programmes targeted at children in countries around the world, including Western liberal democracies.

While the Coalition is an ethical and political opponent to the militarisation of children, its promotional material superficially resembles that of the ADF. Like the Gap Year campaign, the Coalition's website homepage displays a banner image of a young, empowered person.⁶ Both images emphasise youth; both rely on the fetishist impact of modern technology in its capacity to augment the power of the individual. However, the Coalition's child is the antithesis of the gap year recruit. His eyes and face are those of an African boy, holding his weapon vertically against his face. He looks straight into the camera with vacant yet slightly menacing eyes; it is a familiar image. It is familiar because it is this child, rather than the ADF child, who typifies the iconic manifestation of the child soldier.⁷ Global efforts to raise awareness of child soldiering often rely upon the image of a lone, unsmiling, armed African boy to portray, through the visual shorthand of expression and composition, the horrors of militarising children.

Read together, these two images raise questions about the representations and forms of knowledge that accrete around militarised children. The ADF campaign presents militarism as an opportunity for personal empowerment, for education and skills training, for becoming an adult and a productive and respected citizen of the nation. The Coalition's image presents an ominous case of innocence lost, childhood abandoned; of rights and opportunities denied. While the two children portrayed share an identity as pseudo-soldier, each image implies an identity that is worlds apart from the other.

The Australian boy is presented as school-educated, white, male but, more significantly, a promising candidate for the future opportunities and responsibilities of adulthood. With his community's support his militarisation is a stepping stone which promises to launch him, with confidence, into a bright future in military or civilian life; he is an agent in control of his destiny. The child soldier is an African boy presumably denied the opportunities of education, of play or of a secure, supportive childhood. Because of his community's negligence and failure, his militarisation is an end point from which he must recover, rehabilitate and rebuild his life. For him rehabilitation is achieved with the sympathy and support of the children and armed conflict advocacy network; he is a victim dominated by his past.

If examined in unison, the matching of youth with militarism seems to celebrate the coming of age in the global North, while mourning the loss of innocence in the global South. When juxtaposed, it becomes easy to identify the two conflicting narratives that emerge from the militarisation of two youths of comparative age. The politics which enable the militarisation of youth to be simultaneously empowering in one part of the world and disempowering in another are both simple and complex. Certainly the effect of such politics spills far beyond the children themselves. It speaks to the ways in which peoples, communities, networks and nations construct and promote militarised identities that underpin, and then reify, narratives of conflict within global politics. In this regard it is worth emphasising that the political complexity of representing militarised children is not limited to a model of active, objective presentation of a passive subject. Children themselves frequently narrate (and are frequently used to narrate) the moral, political, social, cultural and even legal undercurrents of both militarism and conflict. While the two campaigns may see themselves as independent of broader politics, they assist in narrating discourses of conflict.

This article seeks to account for the disjuncture between the global South and North in their conceptualisations of militarised children. It does so by analysing how the differing images and experiences are deployed to construct knowledge about conflict and conflicting actors. By demonstrating that certain representations of militarised children (and not others) become important, perhaps even iconic, symbols, the article argues that such symbols are deployed in global politics to construct moral and political knowledge about conflict, conflicting actors and relations between the global South and North. In particular, it is argued that the liberal, international community often deploys conceptualisations of the global South's militarised child to reinforce North–South power relations.

In demonstrating this argument, the article focuses upon two types of militarised campaign and two elements of the liberal community. The first is the so-called new wars of the global South and their representation by humanitarian organisations in the global North. The first section focuses upon those conflicts located on the African continent, as it is from here that the stereotypical child soldier has emerged (the lone African boy with an AK-47). It is argued that this image is deployed by the liberal humanitarian community both to directly and incidentally construct knowledge about

contemporary Africa and to reinforce its humanitarian obligation to it. It will be demonstrated that in the global North this knowledge/power relationship is imbued with moral paternalism and colonial overtones.

Next, the article turns to the global North's political and military investment in the so-called humanitarian wars of the global South. These are wars that the ADF child may eventually become involved in. Tagged as 'humanitarian wars', these asymmetrical conflicts similarly see a liberal political-military community deploy images of children to construct moral and political knowledge about war. In particular, this section of the article will focus upon Western representations of the militarisation of children by the Taliban in the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan. Through a discursive analysis the article argues that the selective discussion of children's experiences in the Afghanistan conflict serves to reify knowledge about who can be considered humanitarian actors.

Who is the militarised child?

Despite the recent global focus on child soldiering, the association of children with militarism is commensurate with the written historical record.⁸ The long relationship between children and militarism has seen children become conflict's victims and its agents. Historians point to the mythic and actual feats of early child soldiers like Joan of Arc and Alexander the Great, while also recording the tragedies faced by war-affected children.⁹ However, since the end of the Cold War in particular, global advocacy has developed around the issue of children and armed conflict.¹⁰ Acting as a consequence and further catalyst for this was the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which in 1989 was ratified by every member of the UN with the exception of the USA and Somalia. The convention now includes two Optional Protocols, one of which deals specifically with children and armed conflict (2002). The UNCRC was followed in 1990 by the World Summit for Children, and in 1996 by publication of the UN-sponsored Machel Report on the *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* and a 2009 update of that report entitled *Children and Conflict in a Changing World*. An expanding network of UN and NGO advocacy groups has emerged around the issue of children and armed conflict. This issue covers a range of concerns from the physical impact of armed conflict on children, to displacement, to the disruption that war causes to childhood development. Part of this global network is constituted by the issue's growing prominence in popular culture and among younger people, particularly in the global North. For instance, the 'War Child' project established in 1993 uses the resources of the film and entertainment industries to raise money for war-affected children. War Child Canada promotes associations with Avril Lavigne, Bryan Adams, Simple Plan and other musicians as integral to its fund-raising activities.¹¹ In literature there has been a proliferation of former child soldier memoirs, like Sierra Leonean Ishmael Beah's 2007 *A Long Way Gone* and Sudanese musician Emmanuel Jal's 2009 *War Child*. Hollywood films like the 2006 *Blood Diamond* portray the activities of child soldiers during the Sierra Leone

civil war, while in May 2009 actor Angelina Jolie raised attention to the issue by attending the trial of a Congolese warlord charged by the International Criminal Court with child soldiering.

While the issue of children and armed conflict is broad, there has been a more recent specific focus on the issue of child soldiers. Carpenter identifies the issue of child soldiers as the single most prominent category of war-affected children within the children and armed conflict advocacy network.¹² In her 2005 analysis of 30 major advocacy organisations she noted that 75 per cent of websites dealt directly with the issue of child soldiers. She also noted that a number of organisations identified the specific issue of child soldiers as being synonymous with the broader concern of children and armed conflict.¹³ In presenting this evidence Carpenter demonstrates that different issues concerning war-affected children are offered disproportionate attention. UNICEF's 2009 Report *Children and Conflict in a Changing World* provides some confirmation of this claim. It describes the military recruitment of children as being the second of 'six grave violations against children' (the first being the direct targeting of children for death or serious injury).¹⁴ The disproportionate attention given to child soldiers as only one war-affected group of children is also highlighted when considered in the context of UNICEF's recent claim that 'globally, just over one billion children under the age of 18 live in countries or territories affected by armed conflict'.¹⁵

Nonetheless, the growing prominence of the child soldiering issue should be considered a success by its advocates. While neither UNICEF nor the Coalition provides estimates of the current number of child soldiers,¹⁶ both reinforce the sense that the numbers are decreasing. This is based, in part, on the contention that 'the number of armed conflicts in which children are involved is down, from 27 in 2004 to 17 by the end of 2007'.¹⁷ However, attending this success should be concerns with how this issue is being presented to global audiences. From images displayed at rock concerts to book cover jackets, movie posters, NGO annual reports, newspaper articles and child advocacy websites there has been a strong tendency to dilute the complex issue of children and armed conflict to the iconic image of an African, male, child soldier toting an AK-47. As noted in the introduction, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers is an organisation that understands the complexity of militarising children. Yet the main portal into the organisation, its website homepage, displays the single image of an African child soldier. This stereotype problematically oversimplifies the issues associated with militarised children. First, it implies that states belonging to the global North do not militarise their children. This enables an active ignorance of the multiple ways in which countries like the USA, the UK and Australia do in fact do so.¹⁸ Second, the one-dimensional view of child soldiers encourages a neglect of militarised children who are neither male nor African.¹⁹ Third, the stereotypical image neglects the diversity of militarism's impact on children in the global South, and indeed throughout the world.²⁰ In short, this problematic stereotype fails to engage the breadth of what it means to militarise children.

This deliberately confuses clear conceptualisations of what constitutes a child soldier. Avoiding the term, in 2007 UNICEF defined 'children associated

with armed forces or groups' as 'any person below 18 years of age who is, or who has been, recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, spies or for sexual purposes'.²¹ Using this definition to inform its position, UNICEF's key 'principles underscore the humanitarian imperative to seek the unconditional release of children from armed forces or armed groups at all times, even in the midst of conflict and for the duration of the conflict'.²² Under this definition, the ADF child would certainly be considered as 'associated with armed forces'. In addition to being associated with the Australian Defence Force, he is militarised in the sense that he has been imbued with principles of militarism and, presumably, trained for, or introduced to, the practice of war. But is he a child soldier? The Coalition would consider the ADF child to be a child soldier.²³ While the use of this term is supported by the position statement described above, the application of the term 'child soldier' is, however, more complex. The Optional Protocol to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (2002) similarly does not use the term 'child soldier.' Instead, it outlines regulations regarding 'the involvement of children in armed conflict'. In doing so, it allows government forces to recruit (but not deploy) children from the age of 16, provided that the recruitment is genuinely voluntary. On the other hand, non-governmental armed groups are prohibited from recruiting or using in hostilities anyone under the age of 18. Furthermore, it is deemed the state's responsibility to criminalise any such activity within its own borders. What absolves the Australian boy from the label 'child soldier' is the patronage of his state. Yet, when we move to a consideration of the new wars, the supposed breeding ground of the contemporary child soldier, the role and position of the state is often unstable enough to question the utility of such distinctions.

Locating militarised children in new wars and old wars

Knowledge about conflict is constructed. At the heart of this construction is often a series of facts that might include dates and times of attacks, invasions, declarations or mobilisations; it might also include data on the quantity and capacity of weapons, armies or coalitions. Yet the ways in which these facts are organised and presented generate knowledge about conflict which will always be heavily narrated and therefore contestable.²⁴ Questions of where to begin timelines, who to label as belligerents or aggressors, who to identify as victims and responsible defenders, and what event or issue constitutes the 'breaking point', all influence the final composition of a conflict's landscape.²⁵ Yet it is not just the politicisation of facts which construct the ways in which conflict is understood. It is also constructed through images, discourses, and stereotypes which, in turn, are interpreted through preconceived social, political and cultural understandings. It is here that the militarised child becomes a powerful icon that assists in constructing contemporary understandings of conflict. This also explains the predominance of the African male child as the poster boy of contemporary conflict on

the African continent if not in the global South more broadly. In short, the African boy reflects and reinforces pre-existing notions of the global South as a morally defunct zone of tragedy.

This view is reinforced by claims that the 21st century is witness to an imbroglio of regionalised ‘new wars’.²⁶ New wars literature suggests that a number of contemporary conflicts can be distinguished by identifiers which are non-traditional in terms of major 20th century conflicts. Such wars involve an array of state and non-state actors contesting divergent political, economic and cultural agendas through a range of traditional and non-traditional militarised strategies that operate through a series of localised and globalised networks. The key element of the new wars is that violence is often directed at civilians. This is done for the purposes of instilling fear, terror and compliance, or to carry out strategies of ethnic cleansing and genocide. Kaldor writes that ‘violations of humanitarian and human rights law are not a side effect of war but the central methodology of new wars. Over 90 per cent of the casualties in the new wars are civilian and the number of refugees and displaced persons per conflict has risen steadily’.²⁷ While these figures have been disputed,²⁸ the analysis that civilians are increasingly the deliberate targets of combatants is shared by others such as Keen, who writes that ‘the displacement of civilians has frequently been a *goal* of conflict (as in ethnic cleansing) rather than just a by-product’ (emphasis in original).²⁹ In short, the literature suggests that traditional analyses of war which focus predominantly on state actors and designated battlefields is insufficient to understand the dynamics and breadth of contemporary warfare.

The theorisation of new wars rarely engages the militarisation of children directly except occasionally to identify them as part of the proliferation of armed groups.³⁰ The reverse, however, is not true. The new wars discourse provides the background for much of the current discussion of child soldiering.³¹ The new wars literature can be broadly divided into two typologies which each offer distinct opportunities to analyse and conceptualise militarised children. The first is a populist representation of new wars which relies upon notions of ‘ancient ethnic hatreds’ and ‘impassioned and embittered politics’ thought to explain the violence that plagues the global South. This body of literature, popularised by media commentators and some academics, describes the new wars as being savage, primordial and typified by brutal, personalised violence. From the ‘ancient hatreds’ landscape the emergence of the one-dimensional child soldier can only be explained as the product of moral decay. Foreshadowing much of this literature is Robert Kaplan’s influential 1994 *Atlantic Magazine* article ‘The coming anarchy’. In this article Kaplan presents his imagining of the threatening and conflict-ridden states of West Africa. His review is replete with images of dangerous children, presented as portents of doom. For example, he references the menacing ‘boys’ who took power in Sierra Leone and wreaked havoc on its streets. He foreshadows the potential for ongoing child-generated violence through references to ‘a corrugated metal shack teeming with children’. He later hints at further simmering danger as he describes ‘children defecat[ing] in streets filled with garbage and pigs’,

children with ‘protruding bellies, [who] seemed as numerous as ants’. In this imagining the child is presented as having been corrupted by a society which is devoid of basic human standards. As he contrasts this with his own liberal, Western childhood, Kaplan reinforces the sense of difference and establishes a clear us-versus-them dichotomy. When child soldiers are popularly imagined against this backdrop, they emerge organically as a product of their difference, deprivations and ethnicity. For Kaplan, children are the litmus test for the current corruption and future decay of a society. From this representation of the new wars, child soldiers are the threatening and uncivilised consequences for a society that cannot demonstrate basic civilised humanity.

While Kaplan’s thesis was widely discredited throughout academia,³² it did set the tone for much of the public commentary regarding post-cold war conflicts, particularly those on the African continent. In reference to the conflict in Sierra Leone, headlines in major newspapers throughout 1999 read: ‘Sierra Leone’s killer children’ (Scotland’s *Herald*) or ‘Sierra Leone is no place to be young’ (*New York Times Magazine*). Hoffman explains that ‘the iconic figure of the heavily armed, alienated young male now signifies for many a culture of barbarism, history’s “first man”, employing indiscriminate violence to satisfy his wants and needs’.³³ In these readings children and young people generally were presented as hyper-militarised and empowered products of the new wars, both menacing and at the same time victims of the resource wars, power vacuums, poverty, scarcity and proliferation of light weapons that characterised the new war landscape.

This representation of the new wars has attracted sustained critique, particularly from critical scholars.³⁴ In his analysis of the conventional representation of new wars Keen writes that ‘contemporary conflict has repeatedly been depicted, notably in much of the media, as mindless violence, tribalism, chaos, or some combination of these’.³⁵ Yet, Keen observes, ‘it is not always clear whether it is the violence that is mindless, or the analysis’.³⁶ He continues by suggesting that the tribalism that is on display is not in the conflict zone but in the minds of the analyst.³⁷ First, it detaches the global South from the global North through the presentation of irreconcilable differences between the former’s way of life and ours. This is done without considering what possible connections the politics of the global North has with the situations within the global South, and vice versa. Second, it identifies the global North as the untroubled norm and the global South as the ethnic other. This labelling of ethnic difference as the foundation of new wars enables commentators to dismiss new wars as uncivilised and tribal.³⁸ Rather than offering analytical insight, such a perception allows the global North to congratulate itself on its normality as well as on its strong moral and ethical stand, while simultaneously condemning new wars as primitive ethnic conflicts, as if ‘ethnicity is something that happens to other people’.³⁹ This offers little more than a determinist view that suggests child soldiers are the natural, unavoidable and threatening product of the post-cold war era’s ethnic conflicts.

The second interpretation of new wars is that espoused by scholars like Kaldor, Keen and Duffield, who take an instrumentalist view in

understanding the patterns of relationships and networks that feed the continuation of political violence in parts of the global South.⁴⁰ This involves rejecting a statist analysis of conflict in preference of a consideration of the complete range of actors and influencing politics. Keen argues that within the new wars framework ‘events, however horrible and catastrophic, are actually *produced*, they are made to happen by a diverse and complicated set of actors who may well be achieving their objectives in the midst of what looks like failure and breakdown’ (emphasis in original).⁴¹ With particular reference to the post-cold war conflict in the Balkans, Kaldor argues that there was a complex network of issues which fed into the eruption of violence. These included processes of globalisation, the recent history of communism, a criminalised informal economy, and what she describes as a largely ‘invented’ history disguised as a ‘new nationalism’.⁴² Consequently this scholarship seeks to investigate the actual causes of conflict rather than dismissing it as the product of ancient ethnic hatreds or tribal rivalries. From this theoretical framework it is possible to elucidate a conceptualisation and analysis of the militarised child as something quite different from its construction as the uncivilised, ethnic other.

In a critical interpretation the militarisation of children may be understood within the political, social and economic context in which it has emerged. This context highlights the strategic targeting of civilians for violence, as well as potentially pre-existing contexts of poverty, famine or displacement. It may also be one in which there is a high level of non-state militarised actors (militias), as well as a relatively high population of youth and unprotected minors, and an absence of the application of international law or norms. Within this context the emergence of child soldiers is not so much an unavoidable product of ethnicity as it is a response to the complex construction of the *in situ* context. And this context, in turn, is the product of local and global networks of connections. New wars scholars argue that, in order to understand conflict, analysts need to follow the connections of conflict, money, resources, people and goods within and between the global North and South. The same is true for the emergence of child soldiers. Resource wars, for example, frequently employ children as militarised workers. Throughout the Angolan civil war children were seized by the National Union for Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) to act as soldiers and labourers in the Angolan diamond mines.⁴³ Similarly, large numbers of children were trafficked in to work and soldier in the mineral mines of the Democratic Republic of Congo.⁴⁴ States and actors within the global North, in turn, have demonstrated strong investments in resource wars as a foundational platform for their national (resource) security policies.⁴⁵

Just as new wars are not produced by events isolated in one location, neither is the militarised child a product of one particular zone. A critical analysis of the new wars’ intersections reveals this. Once the stereotype of the child soldier is challenged, it becomes clear that the militarisation of children is not isolated to the global South. It could be argued that the ADF’s campaign discussed in the introduction to this article is a product of the difficulty the ADF has experienced in recruiting and retaining personnel since

the advent of the 'war on terror'.⁴⁶ Similarly, militaries in the US and UK have since 2001 conducted recruitment drives targeting high schools and other places where they are likely to encounter children.⁴⁷ An awareness of this complicates any superficial portrayal of the militarised child. In doing so, it raises questions regarding different children's social contexts, experiences and abilities to exercise agency. Rather than finding ways to differentiate their children from our own, this analysis may begin to identify similarities. Carolyn Nordstrom argues: 'it is both dangerous and unrealistic to look at the abuse of children, in war, in another country, in another context as if that were somehow different and more barbaric than the patterns of abuse that characterize our own everyday cultures, in peace and war'.⁴⁸ This second, critically inspired conceptualisation of new wars enables the possibility of establishing a more accurate understanding of the causes and context of the militarisation of children.

Children and new wars: discourses of humanitarianism

Neither the determinist nor the critical discourses of new wars described above centralise children as a key analytical unit. The former presents the experience of children as indicators of mayhem and moral decay, while the latter provides an analytical framework for analysing militarised children in new wars, but fails to apply it. Yet they are both important because they inform the humanitarian practices of the global child advocacy network which deals with the issue of child soldiers. Images and narratives of children used by this network are influenced by both of the readings of the new wars outlined above, sometimes in ways that obscure the distinctions between the two. For instance, the Coalition straddles these conflicting conceptualisations in its work: its *Global Reports*, produced every four years, recognise that the militarisation of children is a problem that spans the world, from the global North to the global South. The Coalition is aware that children are militarised in different ways and in different contexts, from high school gyms, shopping malls and computer games in North America, to promises of protection, rewards and shelter on the African continent. Yet the single image on its website's homepage presents the iconic African boy soldier. Similarly, the single quote, placed underneath the image, reads: 'In many countries, children are used in combat, to lay mines, as guards, scouts, spies, porters, cooks and for sexual purposes'. Both this quote and the image above it reference the archetypical chaotic new war. They do not seek to challenge the viewer's understandings or expectations of child soldiers. Instead, they present the reader with a recognisable and marketable brand that appeals to its target audience.

In explaining the reliance upon such problematic stereotypes, Carpenter suggests that advocacy networks are torn in a 'cost-benefit analysis' between the contradictions that they see on the ground (largely in the global South) and what they can reasonably sell to their donors and funding agents (mostly located in the global North).⁴⁹ Carpenter argues that humanitarian actors within the network use 'a strategic framing process in which pre-existing

cultural ideas, filtered through an environment characterized by various political constraints, impact the rhetorical strategies available to advocates'.⁵⁰ The image of the African child soldier is used because it resonates with audiences. Yet it resonates with audiences because it is continually used. Even though this image in part stifles the Coalition's mandate to demonstrate the global breadth of the practice of militarising children, it is used because it is recognisable, it conforms with pre-existing knowledge about the issue, and it is not threatening to a Western audience's sensibilities in the way that an Australian or American child might be.

It is debatable whether this strategy of encouraging awareness of the issue by essentialising child soldiers is outweighed by the necessary trade-offs.⁵¹ After all, the reasons why this image has the ability to resonate throughout contemporary global politics is because it is associated with a long-time practice that reinforces unequal global North–South relations. That practice, of course, is colonialism. It is not colonialism in the form of violent suppression of an indigenous population by an external power. Instead, its colonial tendencies are demonstrated by a series of distant powers (including states and transnational organisations) which seek to maintain asymmetrical power relations that privilege the global North as the civilised self and depict the global South as the barbaric other. Furthermore, this is not operationalised for the purposes of brutal control, but in order to conduct humanitarian operations.⁵²

There are three ways in which this image of child soldiers echoes colonialism. First, the representation of the militarised child in the global South reflects colonial re-imaginings of global power relations in which the global South is the wayward child in need of guidance. As Manzo explains, there are clear parallels 'between the iconography of childhood and the colonial iconography of savagery'.⁵³ In this sense it feeds upon a pre-existing metaphor of Africa as a child.⁵⁴ In the case of the child soldier it presents Africa as a menacing, violent and chaotic child embroiled in a series of irrational tantrums. This representation, in turn, legitimates the actions and activities of humanitarian organisations.⁵⁵ Throughout the global North images of suffering children have become a significant part of 'the dominant iconography of the Global South',⁵⁶ whether they are starving children, children in forced labour, or child soldiers. The African child soldier is one in a catwalk of children that reminds the global North of the infantilism of the global South.

Second, the iconography of the child soldier reinstates the importance of difference between the global South and the global North. The difference between our children and their children acts as a metaphor for broader social, cultural, political and ethnic differences between us and them. This difference is demonstrated through the deviance of certain child soldiers from the idealised form of childhood promulgated through liberal norms. Documents such as the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) universalise idealised notions of childhood and children's development within a liberal and Western framework.⁵⁷ The consequence of this is that it denies other conceptualisations of childhood, childhood development,

or children's relationships, agency and responsibility within their social worlds.⁵⁸ Consequently, as Burman points out, the UNCRC 'can be understood as indicating conceptual and political investments in maintaining particular conceptions of children as representative icons of western civilized subjectivity, with more or less explicit contrasts to its "others"'.⁵⁹ This is not to suggest that soldiering should constitute a legitimate part of childhood; however, when juxtaposed to a liberal-ideal notion of childhood, it reinforces notions of abnormality. Through references to the liberal standard the global South can be easily condemned for failing to protect its children,⁶⁰ while the global North is presented as the responsible care giver. When employed as a metaphor for global North–South relations, the perceived failure of the global South to suitably care for its children demonstrates a broader incompetence.

Third, the stereotypical image of the child soldier is invariably an individual portrait of a boy who is alone. He is presented as being abandoned, without family or community support. Wells' research found that humanitarian campaigns most frequently mobilise images of the lone child as an element of their fundraising strategies.⁶¹ She argues that this is intentionally designed to represent the abandonment of the child, rather than simply depicting the child as being alone.⁶² In particular, the portrait of the single child places the viewer in face-to-face contact with the child, thus identifying the viewer as his missing carer.⁶³ This type of portrait therefore externalises the rescuer and implies that there is nobody within the child's community who may care for him. In terms of global politics this places the global South as the cause of the child's abandonment, and the global North as its rescuer. In doing so it also denies the adults within children's communities the political and moral agency to make decisions about their children. Instead, it is implied that the adults are the cause of the children's insecurities without due consideration of the broader social context.⁶⁴ Consequently the role of saving children must be handed to outside professionals.

These professionals form part of a liberal humanitarian network that encompasses a diverse range of organisations. This article does not claim that all NGOs deploy stereotypical images of child soldiers, nor that, if they do, they do so with deliberate neocolonial ambitions. Rather, it suggests that the dominant conceptualisation of child soldiers is infused with pre-existing social, political and moral knowledge that can be capitalised on by the processes of liberal humanitarianism. Children are presented as politically innocent beings whose childhoods have been corrupted by chaotic, violent and tribal new wars, and can only be rescued and rehabilitated by donors in the global North. Yet, as Wessells argues, 'these images oversimplify a complex reality and invite a host of damaging errors'.⁶⁵ The point of contention, therefore, regards the success with which humanitarian actors can then problematise dominant stereotypes in order to both reveal and address the complexity of the global militarisation of children.

From new wars to humanitarian wars: discourses of moral militarism

In circumstances where child advocacy is not the primary object, children can be similarly deployed as the dividing line between ourselves and our others. As discussed, the politicisation of militarised children within the new wars contexts serves to differentiate *their* children from *our* children. This is similarly the case for the humanitarian wars waged by liberal democracies against their others. The US-backed war in Afghanistan provides evidence of the manipulation of the militarised child in constructing knowledge about this war. Much has been written about the iconic image of burqa-clad Afghan women dominated under the brutal Taliban regime in Afghanistan.⁶⁶ These women were placed in the roles of victims within a rescue-romance drama that in part morally justified the US's intervention as a humanitarian liberation rather than violent revenge against the co-ordinators of the 9/11 attacks.⁶⁷ Yet children have been manipulated in similar ways. Conflict zones are presented as places for neither women nor children. Like women, children are feminised and presented as passive victims that should be automatically considered as innocent.⁶⁸ The long-held moral and political justification that good wars protect women and children remains powerfully dominant, despite feminist and other critiques.⁶⁹ It continues to entrench a strong moral code which measures the moral fortitude of identities by the way in which they (are seen to) treat women and children. This in part explains the attention given to women's human rights issues in Afghanistan *after* 9/11. It also explains the current focus on the militarised child in Afghanistan.

Unlike the child soldiers on the African continent who tote AK-47s, Afghanistan's militarised child is styled as a suicide bomber, misused by the Taliban. In fact, the US-led coalition in Afghanistan frequently refers to the Taliban's ill treatment of children. Upon assuming his role as Commander of the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) in Afghanistan, General David Petraeus reported: 'No tactic is beneath the insurgents; indeed, they use unwitting children to carry out attacks, they repeatedly kill innocent civilians, and they frequently seek to create situations that will result in injury to Afghan citizens'.⁷⁰ The use of child soldiers by the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan since 2001 is well documented in the Western press. In July 2009 the *Washington Post* ran an exclusive story entitled 'Taliban buying children for suicide bombers'. Under the photograph of a shackled 14-year-old boy was the caption: 'The use of children in war is not unusual in the region'. After a suicide attack by a 13-year-old and his eight-year-old brother in Helmand Province in December 2008, the British *Telegraph* described this as 'a worrying development' because 'in the battle to win hearts and minds, troops are encouraged to be friendly and approachable especially when children are concerned'.⁷¹ This echoed the theme of a year earlier when the *Guardian* reported that 'Children as young as six are being used by the Taliban in increasingly desperate suicide missions'.⁷² Quoting Lieutenant Colonel David Accetta from the ISAF, this article continued: 'In the past we

have not seen the Taliban sink that low, to use children as suicide bombers. . . They are deliberately putting civilians—women and children—at risk by bringing the combat into close proximity with them'.⁷³ But there was also a stern warning here. Petraeus's comment hints at the potential for the radicalisation of the next generation of Afghans, who may grow up to be the new enemies of global security. This theme was also evident in the *Telegraph* article, which outlined how a child suicide bomber had been taken from a *madrassa*, isolated, indoctrinated and radicalised.⁷⁴

Both Petraeus's and Accetta's references to the enemy's abuse of children is an attempt simultaneously to demonise the enemy and to reinforce the moral certitude of domestic audiences by reminding them that the campaign in Afghanistan has morally sound foundations. Children are rhetorically placed in between the warring parties as a key difference. The Taliban use children as weapons in their desperate war and the ISAF highlight it as evidence of the Taliban's moral depravity. This is not to suggest that these are lies or are inappropriate representations of Taliban military strategy. However, it nonetheless demonstrates the discursive deployment of children in narrating the conflict. The use of children to communicate a message about the Taliban—their desperation and their immorality—is successful precisely because children are thought to be un-political and without agency, and therefore malleable. Their use by the Taliban in this instance demonstrates the Taliban's defilement of politically innocent children.

While the experiences of some Afghan children are used to demonise the Taliban, Petraeus' inaugural speech mobilised other children to commend the commitment of the ISAF. Here, children were used as indicators of the success of the coalition's campaign. Petraeus noted: 'Indeed, seven million Afghan children are now in school, as opposed to less than one million a decade ago. Immunisation rates for children are now in the 70 to 90 per cent range nationwide'.⁷⁵ This juxtaposition of child abuse and child protection/rescue is a simplistic reinforcement of the basic binary code of evil versus good: it offers children no agency to manipulate their own situations, it offers Afghan parents no credit for their abilities to either protect or defend their children under difficult circumstances, and it says absolutely nothing about the children who have been rendered more insecure by the activities of the ISAF. Thus, while children are a strong and recurring theme in Petraeus' speech, and in other media coming from Afghanistan, such references are both simplistic and selective. The media focus on the militarised child is not an attempt to set the agenda of the cause of children's rights or children's insecurities. Rather, the militarised child is used to reinforce the pre-existing moral code of a conflict of humanitarian heroes on the one hand and an inhumane militia on the other. Like the global North's humanitarian projects on the African continent, the militarised child has become a powerful symbol which is deployed to construct and reinforce a particular knowledge about relations between the global North and the global South.

Even so, it is difficult to deny that the use of children as suicide bombers is horrendous. Yet it is important to remember that its prominence in the narrative of this conflict is a selective use of one particular group of

militarised children. Children are militarised throughout this conflict in many ways. They are recruited by coalition-trained Afghan Security Forces, private and auxiliary forces, and other armed opposition groups.⁷⁶ Furthermore, they encounter militarism at the hands of ISAF. In 2009 the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan reported that 346 children were killed as a result of conflict-related violence, including 131 through air strikes and 22 in night raids by special forces. This slightly outnumbers the 128 children who were killed through assassinations, suicide bombings and other attacks by armed opposition groups.⁷⁷ Yet, while the latter are broadly politicised, the former are not. Similarly the children who are detained by pro-government forces in Afghanistan receive little attention. This includes the eight-year detention of Omar Khadr at the Guantanamo Bay military facility, who was 15 when he was captured in July 2002. This breaches the US's commitment to the Additional Protocol to the Convention to the Rights of the Child, which requires states encountering militarised children to provide them with 'all appropriate assistance for their physical and psychological recovery and their social reintegration'.⁷⁸ Similarly the recruitment and enlistment of children in the militaries of those states that constitute the ISAF demonstrate further militarisation of children in this conflict. It is here that the ADF's gap year recruit, profiled in this article's introduction, comes into focus as a consequence of Australia's decade-long military involvement in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the predominant conceptualisation of the militarised child is a powerful symbol in contemporary global politics. It is powerful because it constitutes an oxymoron representing everything that may be wrong with a society. It is an image which, on the one hand, invokes the notions of innocence and vulnerability and, on the other, matches it with the violence of contemporary conflict. Seemingly born out of the horrors of the 21st century's new wars, the militarised child is presented to viewers as the dividing line which sees societies occupy either the realm of the civilised or the uncivilised. The treatment of children becomes a key battleground which assists in constituting a broader social identity and, potentially, a marker of difference between one society and another. In this sense it is an important constituent in a body of knowledge which suggests that those societies which (are seen to) mistreat their children must be either rescued and rehabilitated, or punished and reconstructed by the global community. This is demonstrated first by elements of the global humanitarian community, who rely upon particular representations of children caught up in new wars to justify narratives of rescue. Second, it is also evident in the political–military discourse of the global North, which again uses particular representations of children to justify a humanitarian war. In both cases children are represented as the innocent victims of a decaying society. They mark the difference between a demonised enemy other who uses children as cannon fodder, and a humanitarian self who seeks to rescue and rehabilitate children.

For many in the global North an understanding of new wars is the product of this narration. It is presented by those who collate, organise and at times manufacture snippets of information and facts designed to construct knowledge regarding conflict zones. It is in this context that the concept of child soldiers in the global South is most powerful. It immediately evokes images of horror, disgust and pity. It feeds upon pre-existing understandings of the global South and the global North's responsibility to it, through either humanitarianism or war. In doing so, it reinforces existing global North–South relations. It is in this context that militarised children in the global South can be immediately recognised as child soldiers, while the same is not true of militarised children in the global North. Within liberal communities militarised children are seen as burgeoning with the opportunities of imminent citizenry as they launch a career that involves ‘travel, mateship, fitness, and a great salary’,⁷⁹ with no mention of the horrors of war. This is not to say that children's experiences with militarism in the global South should be seen as commensurate with those of the global North, nor does it trivialise the wretched practice of child soldiering, particularly in the global South. Instead, this article has demonstrated that the construction of the ‘child soldier’ is a powerful icon which speaks less of children, their human rights and insecurities, and more of contemporary global North–South power relations. As a result, children's diversity, the range of their experiences, the complexity of their agency, and their individual needs can be silenced. This fails to challenge the enduring patterns of (re)presentation and analysis which at best predetermine, but mostly disregard, the global causes of children's militarisation, as well as the solutions necessary to address them.

Notes

- 1 This article uses the definition of children provided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as being ‘every human being below the age of 18 years’.
- 2 See <http://www.defencejobs.gov.au/education/Gapyear/>, accessed 23 February 2011.
- 3 Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, *Global Report 2008*, London: Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008.
- 4 This refers to a loose collaboration of United Nations agencies, NGOs, and state bodies who lobby for child rights, protection and immunity in conflict and post-conflict zones within the global community.
- 5 <http://www.child-soldiers.org/home>, accessed 25 November 2010.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 M Denov, ‘Girl soldiers and human rights: lessons from Angola, Mozambique, Sierra Leone and Northern Uganda’, *International Journal of Human Rights*, 12(5), 2008, p 813.
- 8 AMS Watson, ‘Children and international relations: a new site of knowledge?’, *Review of International Studies*, 32(2), 2006, p 244.
- 9 For instance Thucydides speaks of the enslavement of the children of Melos after the island's defeat by Athens in his classic *The History of the Peloponnesian War*.
- 10 RC Carpenter, ‘Setting the advocacy agenda: theorizing issue emergence and nonemergence in transnational advocacy networks’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 51(1), 2007, pp 99–120.
- 11 The list of affiliated musicians is promoted at: <http://www.warchild.ca/music/musicians>.
- 12 Carpenter, ‘Setting the advocacy agenda’, p 108.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p 109.
- 14 UNICEF, *Children and Conflict in a Changing World*, New York: UNICEF, 2009, pp 21–26.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p 19.
- 16 <http://www.child-soldiers.org/childsoldiers/questions-and-answers>.

- 17 UNICEF, *Children and Conflict in a Changing World*, p 21.
- 18 Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, *Global Report 2008*, pp 52–54, 354–362.
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- 21 UNICEF, 'The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups', February 2007, p 7, at <http://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ParisPrinciples310107English.pdf>.
- 22 *Ibid*, p 5.
- 23 The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 'campaigns for a complete prohibition of all recruitment and use of under-18s for military purposes by an armed force'. See <http://www.child-soldiers.org/childsoldiers/questions-and-answers>.
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- 25 M Shapiro, *Violent Cartographies: Mapping Cultures of War*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- 26 M Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006.
- 27 M Kaldor, *Global Civil Society: An Answer to War*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003, p 121.
- 28 P Mello, 'In search of new wars: the debate about a transformation of war', *European Journal of International Relations*, 16(2), 2010, p 298.
- 29 D Keen, *Complex Emergencies*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008, p 13.
- 30 For instance, Kaldor notes that 'The use of child soldiers is not uncommon in Africa' and dedicates a paragraph to discussing the use of child soldiers in the conflicts in Sierra Leone and Mozambique. Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, p 99.
- 31 See, for example, UNICEF's review of 'the changing nature of conflict' where it focuses upon the elements of new wars. UNICEF, *Children and Conflict in a Changing World*, pp 7–15.
- 32 D Hoffman, 'Disagreement: dissent politics and the war in Sierra Leone', *Africa Today*, 52(3), 2006, pp 8–10.
- 33 *Ibid*, p 3.
- 34 See, for instance, Simon Dalby's critique of Kaplan's work in 'The environment as geopolitical threat: reading Robert Kaplan's "Coming anarchy"', *Cultural Geographies*, 3(4), 1996, pp 472–496.
- 35 D Keen, *Complex Emergencies*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008, p 13.
- 36 *Ibid*.
- 37 *Ibid*.
- 38 RC Carpenter, "'A fresh crop of human misery'": representations of Bosnian "war babies" in the global print media, 1991–2006', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 38(1), 2009, pp 25–54.
- 39 Keen, *Complex Emergencies*, p 6.
- 40 Mello, 'In search of new wars', p 303.
- 41 Keen, *Complex Emergencies*, p 15.
- 42 Kaldor, *Global Civil Society*, pp 123–129.
- 43 UNICEF, *Children and Conflict in a Changing World*, p 12.
- 44 *Ibid*.
- 45 See, for example, M Klare, *Resource Wars: The New Landscape of Global Conflict*, New York: Henry Holt, 2001, p 6.
- 46 See G Callaghan, 'Defence force recruitment on the ropes', *The Australian*, 11 May 2009.
- 47 Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, *Global Report 2008*, pp 52–54, 354–362.
- 48 C Nordstrom, 'Wars and invisible girls, shadow industries and the politics of not-knowing', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 1(1), 1999, p 26.
- 49 RC Carpenter, "'Women, children and other vulnerable groups": gender, strategic frames and the protection of civilians as a transnational issue', *International Studies Quarterly*, 49(2), 2005, pp 295–297.
- 50 *Ibid*, p 295.
- 51 *Ibid*, p 328.
- 52 D Campbell, 'The iconography of famine', in G Batchen, M Gidley, NK Miller & J Prosser (eds), *Picturing Atrocity: Reading Photographs in Crisis*, London: Reaktion Books, forthcoming 2011, p 3.
- 53 K Manzo, 'Imaging humanitarianism: NGO identity and the iconography of childhood', *Antipode*, 40(2), 2008, p 635.
- 54 *Ibid*, p 636; and V Pupovac, 'Misanthropy without borders: the International Children's Rights Regime', *Disasters*, 25(2), 2001, p 103.
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- 56 Manzo, 'Imaging humanitarianism', p 651.
- 57 E Burman, 'Local, global or globalized? Child development and international child rights legislation', *Childhood*, 3(1), 1996, pp 47–48. See also Pupovac, 'Misanthropy without borders', p 101.
- 58 H Brocklehurst, *Who's Afraid of Children? Children, Conflict and International Relations*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, pp 10–11.
- 59 *Ibid.*, p 52.
- 60 Pupovac, 'Misanthropy without borders', p 102.
- 61 K Wells, *Childhood in a Global Perspective*, Cambridge: Polity, 2009, p 37.
- 62 *Ibid.*
- 63 *Ibid.*
- 64 Pupovac, 'Misanthropy without borders', pp 102–109.
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- 66 See K Lee-Koo, 'War on terror/war on women', in R Bleiker, A Bellamy, R Devetak & S Davies (eds), *Security and the 'War on Terror'*, London: Routledge, 2008, pp 42–54.
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- 68 Carpenter, "'Women, children and other vulnerable groups'", p 295.
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Notes on contributor

Katrina Lee-Koo is a senior lecturer in international relations at the Australian National University. Her research interests include feminist international relations, issues of gender in conflict and post-conflict zones, and children and armed conflict. She is the co-editor of *Gender and Global Politics in the Asia-Pacific* (2009) and has recently published articles in her areas of interest in the *Australian Feminist Law Journal* and *Australian Journal of Politics and History*. She is currently co-authoring a book on children in conflict zones.

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