

Interview – Campbell Craig

Written by E-International Relations

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Campbell Craig is Professor of International Relations at Cardiff University. He has held senior fellowships at Bristol University, the Norwegian Nobel Institute, the European University Institute, and Yale University. He specialises in the history of US foreign policy, international relations theory, and nuclear politics, topics about which he has written extensively. He is the author of *Destroying the Village: Eisenhower and Thermonuclear War* (Columbia University Press, 1998); *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and Waltz* (Columbia University Press, 2003); *The Atomic Bomb and the Origins of the Cold War* (Yale University Press, 2008), co-authored with Sergey Radchenko; and *America's Cold War: the Politics of Insecurity* (Second Edition; Harvard University Press, 2020), co-authored with Fredrik Logevall. A list of his publications can be found [here](#).

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

One of the most interesting debates is concerned with US preponderance and unipolarity. Does unipolarity still apply today? And if it does, what effects does it have on US foreign policy? Another more specific debate that I am involved with is about the nuclear revolution – the argument, systematically advanced by Robert Jervis in the 1980s, that the advent of thermonuclear bombs and intercontinental missiles makes major war insane, creates an inescapable condition of Mutual Assured Destruction, and will force large states to value stability and compromise over harsh security competition. Recently several scholars have challenged this argument, contending that nuclear powers don't behave in the way Jervis thought they would, and that the nuclear revolution is a 'myth.' This is a very important debate, because if this new argument is accepted by the people who make US nuclear policy, they are likely to advocate strategies of nuclear superiority over rivals like Russia and, especially, China. Some of these new scholars think that the US has no choice but to do so. I disagree with that.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I have definitely arrived at the conclusion that domestic politics affects US foreign policy to a much greater extent than I used to think. One need only look at what Biden is doing now to see how obvious this is. The person who most influenced me on this score is my co-author, Fred Logevall. In writing our history of US foreign policy during the Cold War, we worked hard to figure out how to make this case convincingly. One of the ways we did that was to highlight the effect of 'free security' – the fact that the US has not normally faced imminent threats to its national survival in the way that previous great powers have. This gives American politicians greater latitude to let domestic influences shape their foreign policy positions, because the stakes of getting things wrong are so low. We are seeing this play out today.

What is Trotsky's Uneven and Combined Development and how does it differ from classical realism? Is it still relevant to modern geopolitics and the nuclear revolution?

Trotsky's concept of Uneven and Combined Development (UCD) is very, very close to classical realism. I highly recommend that everyone drop what they are doing and read Justin Rosenberg's work on UCD and his engagement with realists like Kenneth Waltz. I wrote in an article several years ago that Marxism-Leninism is made obsolete by the nuclear revolution, because it (unlike classical Marxism) envisions major war, war that is made inevitable by

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capitalism, as a crucial catalyst of revolution and the eventual worldwide victory of Marxism. But if such a war kills off humanity, then this plan doesn't work anymore. Khrushchev realised this in the late 1950s. I regard his decision to accept the implications of the nuclear revolution as one of the most important events of the twentieth century.

You have expressed that the threat of nuclear weapons can only be eliminated through the establishment of a world state and the end of international anarchy. Why is this a preferable alternative to further enforcement of the existing non-proliferation regime?

I'm glad you ask this, because I am writing about that regime at the moment. The non-proliferation regime cannot rid us of the danger of nuclear war, because it does nothing, and has chosen to do nothing, about the arsenals of the major powers. Moreover, it has over the past few decades become more and more an explicit arm of US foreign policy. I argue (as did Hans Morgenthau and Albert Einstein, among others) that if we want to eliminate the possibility of nuclear war, really eliminate it, then only a world government can do the job. Complete and irreversible disarmament in a world of anarchy cannot work, as I have written in a recent review. We can muddle along with deterrence, but as Martin Amis once wrote, 'The problem with deterrence is that it can't last out the necessary timespan, which is roughly between now and the death of the sun.' I am aware that world government seems like a total impossibility, especially lately, and I am also aware of the dangers that come with it. My view is that we have to look squarely at what is necessary to eliminate the spectre of nuclear war and accept the logical answer, no matter how utopian or eccentric it may appear. Otherwise, admit that you are OK with eventually exterminating ourselves.

What is the theory of power preponderance? What is the impact of the proliferation of nuclear weapons on American power preponderance?

Power preponderance is a theory advanced by the Dartmouth IR scholars Steve Brooks and Bill Wohlforth. They argue that the persistence of unipolarity – the fact that no state or coalition of states has tried to match American power since the end of the Cold War – can be explained by realist factors. The gap in military and especially technological capabilities between the US and other countries is so vast that potential rivals conclude that it's just too difficult to overcome. Moreover, these potential rivals are all located in the Eastern hemisphere, which means that if they do try to build up their military power to contend with the US, they run the risk of alarming nearby states and triggering regional security competition they would rather avoid.

As both I and Nuno Monteiro have argued, nuclear proliferation poses a fundamental problem for a preponderant US, because if you are able to obtain a small arsenal of nuclear weapons, you can deter US coercion and attack. If the US wants to use its preponderance to get other countries to do what it wants, then it can't have them acquiring the bomb. This is why, as I wrote above, the US has taken an interest in dominating the non-proliferation regime since the end of the Cold War.

The possible use of Russian tactical nuclear weapons against Ukraine became a notable concern in 2022. Is the use of nuclear weapons in a conventional war realistic and what would be the impact and implications?

I believe that states are very unlikely to deliberately use nuclear weapons in a conventional war, unless this is a war for survival. And if you possess nuclear weapons, another state is very unlikely to attack you with the aim of threatening your survival: it has never once happened since 1945. Would Russia or another state use one in a conventional war against a non-nuclear adversary that does not threaten its survival? Again, very unlikely, because the costs of doing so, including the possibility of escalation to a larger nuclear war, massively outweigh the benefits. On top of that, a state that used nuclear weapons in a war like that would become a global pariah state, as Nina Tannenwald argues. I think it is actually more likely that a nuclear weapon would be used in a situation like this accidentally or inadvertently, because something goes wrong or someone goes crazy.

Do you anticipate future changes in policy or attitudes toward nuclear weapons?

I do. We are seeing today, whether it be protests about Gaza or action on climate change, a new generation that

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regards politics-as-usual as unsustainable and reprehensible. New work is being done on nuclear weapons and disarmament that represents a similar view. As I have stated above, however, I do not think disarmament can work without getting rid of anarchy, and do not see how it is possible to get rid of anarchy by means of grassroots, popular politics. I would be delighted to be convinced otherwise on this latter point.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

The main piece of advice I would give is to not aspire to work in government. If you do that you will have an incentive to avoid writing or saying anything that might prevent you from getting a policy job, and this is not what scholars are supposed to do. I firmly believe that I was able to make a successful career for myself at a relatively early age by writing about what I thought was important, rather than what I thought would enhance my prospects of working in foreign policy. Doing what I did gives you a competitive advantage.