

Kenneth Waltz's Thermonuclear Dilemma: Fear, Trust, and the Glimmer of a New Leviathan

Written by Ali Diskaya

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ALI DISKAYA, JUL 18 2012

We knew the world would not be the same. A few people laughed, a few people cried, most people were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad-Gita. Vishnu is trying to persuade the Prince that he should do his duty and to impress him takes on his multi-armed form and says, "Now, I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." I suppose we all thought that one way or another.

– J. Robert Oppenheimer, 1965

Introduction

Sixty-seven years ago, J. Robert Oppenheimer, the 'father of the atomic bomb', reacted to the first atomic explosion that heralded the start of the atomic age by simply saying: "It worked". The exclamation "it worked" must have been repeated hundreds of times since then by nuclear scientists; for today we live in a world with thousands of thermonuclear warheads.

According to Kenneth Waltz, the pre-eminent International Relations (IR) theorist of the post-World War II era, the arms races between nuclear powers and the spread of nuclear weapons do not have to be a terrifying prospect. Waltz's main argument is that the fear of nuclear war is so overwhelming that it will prevent war between nuclear-armed states as it did during the Cold War. This essay, however, rejects the Waltzian position and argues, instead, that lasting peace in a time where all-out thermonuclear war is a constant possibility requires better solutions to the most pressing security issue in the realm of international politics. Therefore, after discussing Waltz's thesis in more detail, this essay will tackle the problem of nuclear proliferation by discussing two alternative approaches – (1) nuclear trust-building through security communities and (2) the resurgent idea of world (nuclear) government. It will conclude by emphasising the importance of fresh critical thinking about nuclear weapons.

More Fear May Be Better

It is the strange fate of man, that even in the greatest of evils the fear of the worst continues to haunt him.

– Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

In his 1981 Adelphi Paper, 'The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better', Kenneth Waltz makes a powerful and controversial argument, stating that the spread of nuclear weapons is a positive development. Waltz criticizes common-sense predictions that the world will become more dangerous as nuclear weapons spread as false, since they point less to likelihoods and more to dangers.[1] The only way we can surely predict outcomes in international politics, Waltz contends, is by "deducing expectations from the structure of the international political system and by inferring expectations from past events and patterns".[2]

Waltz, impressed by the unprecedented war-preventing character of nuclear weapons, argues that besides the shift from multipolarity to bipolarity after World War II, it was the deterrent character of nuclear weapons that has changed

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international politics fundamentally.[3] The existence of second-strike nuclear arsenals, Waltz argues, discourages states from starting any wars that might lead to the use of nuclear weapons. He writes: "in a conventional world, one is uncertain about winning or losing. In a nuclear world, one is uncertain about surviving or being annihilated".[4] Waltz concludes that nuclear deterrence is the major cause of great-power peace and that "with more nuclear states the world will have a promising future".[5]

This is a rather surprising conclusion, since, in his 1959 groundbreaking book *Man, the State, and War* (hereafter *MSW*), Waltz argues that "war occurs because there is nothing to prevent it" – not even the destructive power of nuclear weapons.[6] In *MSW*, Waltz provides a meta-theoretical critique of the main causal theories of war; claiming that 'first'-and 'second-image' explanations fail to account for the recurrence of war. He rejects the hitherto dominant biological realism of Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr, who claim that human nature (*animus dominandi/original sin*) is the major causative factor in great-power war ('first-image'); as well as the belief of some theorists that the political (warlike) nature of certain states explains why major war recurs ('second-image'). In *MSW*, Waltz concludes that *only* the anarchic structure of the international system ('third-image') explains the recurring phenomenon of war.[7] In his other classic book *Theory of International Politics* (hereafter *TIP*), Waltz offers a substantive theory of international politics, found in an embryonic version in *MSW*, which explains when the structure of the international system is more peaceful (bipolar balance of power) and when it collapses into war. However, in both books Waltz argues that as long as there is no world government (something that Waltz saw as highly unlikely) "war will be perpetually associated with the existence of separate sovereign states".[8]

Waltz's position in *MSW* seems completely incompatible with that in his Adelphi Paper. One might ask why the Waltz of 1959, who has argued that war will be perpetually associated with the existence of separate sovereign states, is arguing two decades later that these states should acquire nuclear weapons to guarantee peace. Would this not make nuclear war more likely? In *MSW* Waltz had mostly ignored the thernuclear dilemma because he could not allow it to affect his analysis of international politics. Taking a normative position on the question of nuclear war would have "undermined both the elegance of his methodological argument and also his own consistency as a theoretician interested in analysis rather than justification".[9] In his Adelphi Paper, however, he is doing precisely this; by arguing that nuclear fear – a unit-level phenomenon – plays the greatest role in preventing war and keeping peace.

During his long career Waltz gradually diverged from the structuralist political philosophy he had articulated in *MSW*. As mentioned above, he had initially argued that only the anarchic structure of the international system, a force that human aspirations and fears were helpless to overcome, explained war and peace. In *TIP*, however, Waltz (implicitly) argued that bipolarity, reinforced by nuclear fear, was the driving force of great-power peace. Finally, in his Adelphi Paper, Waltz claims that nuclear fear plays the greatest role in keeping peace – even greater than bipolarity. This fear, he concludes, is so strong that it can (and should) lead to an absolute world: "a world populated entirely by secure [and hyper defensive] nuclear states assured of their survival and uninterested in conquest".^[10] One might ask why Waltz gradually changed his opinion. The answer is simple: from the submission of his dissertation proposal in 1949 (*MSW* emerged from Waltz's dissertation) until the publication of his Adelphi Paper in 1981 Waltz lived thirty years in a period of human history within which major war did not occur. As he put it in 2009:

"Nuclear weapons, *I began to believe*, are the best peace-keeping weapons the world has ever known. In fact they are the only ones that have served the maintenance of peace rather than the making of war...We are in the midst of the longest peace among major powers that the modern world has known.[11]"

Nevertheless, the validity of his *spread* thesis can be easily disproved. Scott Sagan, in his famous debate about the *spread* argument with Waltz, reveals that future nuclear states are unlikely to fulfil the operational requirements for stable nuclear deterrence, because they "display organizational behaviours that are likely to lead to deterrence failures and deliberate or accidental war".[12] In addition to Sagan's theoretical argument which is based on organizational theory, many recent works on Cold War history reveal that the nuclear powers (USA, Soviet Union and China) were willing to wage nuclear war despite the certainty of nuclear retaliation. The accidental or deliberate use of nuclear weapons came close to occurring on many occasions during the Cold War; especially during the 1958 Quemoy and Matsu Crisis, the Berlin Crisis of 1958-59[13] and the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.[14] The fact that these crises did not lead to a nuclear exchange between the Cold War powers does not mean that the next crises will

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not do so too. As Campbell Craig and Jan Ruzicka put it, "a war waged with hundreds of thermonuclear warheads, not a few atomic bombs, is what should really scare us. And over the long term, it is likely to happen".[15]

More Trust May Be Better

This world of ours... must avoid becoming a community of dreadful fear and hate, and be, instead, a proud confederation of mutual trust and respect.

-Dwight D. Eisenhower

At a conference entitled "The King of Thought": Theory, the Subject and Waltz' held at Aberystwyth University in 2008, Nicholas J. Wheeler presented a paper in which he rejected the Waltzian position and argued, instead, that "[l]asting order depends upon the building of trust between the nuclear-armed and arming powers".[16]

Wheeler states that realists might be right in arguing that uncertainty cannot be eliminated from international politics, but they were wrong to conclude that this must lead into a perpetual condition of fear. Fear, especially fear of nuclear destruction, could not serve as a permanent basis of international order. According to Wheeler, therefore, our main aim should be to try to open up space for trust-building under uncertainty. Trust and uncertainty were not antithetical but rather "[t]rust develops under the condition of uncertainty, and never entirely escapes it".[17] But what is this trust? Wheeler describes trust as follows:

A situation where two or more actors, based on the mutual interpretation of each other's attitudes and behaviour, believe that the other(s) now and in the future, can be relied upon [at a minimum] to desist from acting in ways that will be injurious to their interests and values [and at a maximum] ... promote each other's interests and values.[18]

The only way to escape the nuclear security dilemma and transcend the condition of uncertainty at the international level, Wheeler contends, is nuclear trust-building through security communities. The concept of security community was developed by Karl Deutsch in the mid-1950s. Deutsch argues that the peaceful transformation of identities between former enemies within a territory is possible through trust-building, a strong sense of community (recognition of common social problems that can be resolved peacefully) and institution-building.[19] Actors in such a community would not target each other militarily anymore and nuclear weapons may only be kept for a deterrent role vis-à-vis states outside the regional security community.

The most important case of nuclear trust-building, Wheeler argues, was the rapprochement that took place between Argentina and Brazil in the 1980s. Earlier, the two states had been bitter rivals, each of them keen to develop nuclear weapons in order to defend itself and deter the other. However, the decision makers on both sides realised that the opponent may act out of fear caused by their own actions (nuclear arms races). Wheeler calls such sensitivity to fear-based hostility on the part of the leaders 'security dilemma sensibility'. He argues that in the Argentine-Brazilian case "there is evidence that successive leaders were not only able to exercise such empathetic responsiveness to each other's security concerns, but also used this knowledge to develop policies that signalled their mutual trustworthiness".[20] Through a process of mutual reassurance and high levels of transparency in the 1980s, both states abolished their nuclear weapon programmes and cemented the mutual trust by signing the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in the second half of the 1990s.

The crucial question that Wheeler asks at the end of his paper is: "can the Argentine-Brazilian case of nuclear trust-building be generalised as a model for reversing nuclear rivalries and conflicts in other cases?"[21] Considering that there were special regional circumstances in this case, this seems to be unlikely. Neither Argentina nor Brazil possessed or tested nuclear weapons which made cooperation far easier. They were able to come together and build regional institutions and join international treaties (such as the NPT) which enabled both states to be certain about the future intentions of the other – especially concerning their nuclear programs. Argentina and Brazil had, what Brian C. Rathbun calls, *generalised trust*. This reservoir of generalised trust, Rathbun argues, explains how states are able to come together and build up institutions to solve problems of distrust in the first place.[22] However, *generalised trust* is always a leap of faith and needs to be backed up by, what Aaron M. Hoffman calls, *institutionalised trust*. For

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Hoffman, “*trust* refers to an actor’s perception that it may safely delegate control over its interests to other (that is, potential trustees) under certain circumstances” even if some of its own interests suffer.[23] According to Hoffman “[a]ctors prefer trusting relationships to nontrusting forms of cooperation because the latter require more-extensive and, therefore, more-expensive monitoring devices”. [24] Once an institution is established, Hoffman claims, states are ‘locked’ into cooperation and future hostility between them is unlikely.

Nevertheless, other states in what we might call ‘regional insecurity complexes’ such as South Asia or the Middle East already possess nuclear weapons and are spending billions of pounds to further develop them. They have neither *generalised trust* nor *institutionalised trust*. These states form what Dieter Senghaas calls *konfliktformationen* (conflict formations) and interdependence between them arises from fear, rivalry and mutual perceptions of threat.[25] How can regional (nuclear) conflict formations be transformed into regional security communities? The ‘trust-building school’ does not provide a sufficient answer for this problem.

Another problem of Wheeler’s approach is his overreliance on international organisations/treaties in general and the nuclear non-proliferation complex in particular. Wheeler claims that the complex, which aims to stop the spread of nuclear weapons and eventually rid the world of the nuclear danger, has been a great success in mitigating nuclear security dilemmas.[26] Even acknowledging that it managed to limit the increase of new nuclear powers (most notably South Africa, Brazil and Argentina), I cannot share Wheeler’s enthusiasm about the overall success of the ‘project’. The complex has been recently criticised not on grounds of its effectiveness but because “it is a classic liberal institution that pretends to universalism while being in hock to the world’s most powerful states”. [27] These states are manipulating the complex in order to retain the status quo – a system of great (nuclear) power politics. The complex might be successful in preventing anti-Western regimes to acquire nuclear weapons but it has done comparatively little to abolish nuclear weapons altogether.

Glimmer of a New Leviathan

‘World government’ refers to the idea of all humankind united under one common political authority. Arguably, it has not existed so far in human history, yet proposals for a unified global political authority have existed since ancient times — in the ambition of kings, popes and emperors, and the dreams of poets and philosophers.

-Catherine Lu[28]

In *Glimmer of a New Leviathan*, Campbell Craig exposes the normative basis of Waltz’s thought in order to make his argument for world government. He argues that the immutability of anarchy is a (neo-realist) myth and that the creation of a world government – a truly new sovereign political entity with a monopoly in the means of destruction – is not only possible but the *only* way out of the thermonuclear dilemma. Craig claims that not the international system’s bipolar structure, but rather the fear of nuclear retaliation prevented a nuclear exchange between the Cold War superpowers. As we have seen, Waltz himself took this position later in his career. Other than Waltz, however, Craig argues that this fear – an idea that exists in the minds of people – can (and should) facilitate the building of a serious world state.[29]

Confronted with the threat of thermonuclear holocaust, the two foremost American realists Reinhold Niebuhr and Hans Morgenthau reach a similar conclusion. They state that global ‘business-as-usual’ which was dominated by the military competition between states with realist outlooks, Machiavellian ethics and a Clausewitzian philosophy of war is not working in the atomic age. The old Hobbesian Leviathan, which was the main provider of security since the Peace of Westphalia, cannot guarantee the survival of its citizens anymore. Therefore, Niebuhr and Morgenthau agree that the fear of all-out nuclear war could facilitate the building of a world state.[30] “If people can decide upon this fear”, Craig argues, “as Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and effectively, Waltz believe they can, then the building of a world state, of a new Leviathan, in order to eliminate the threat of thermonuclear holocaust is a Realist possibility”. [31]

A more radical argument in favour of world government is provided by Alexander Wendt. Wendt, now America’s most influential IR theorist, argues that a world government is not only desirable but simply ‘inevitable’. [32] In ‘Why a World

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State Is Inevitable' he proposes a teleological theory of the 'logic of anarchy' in which he argues that through the logic of globalization and the struggle of all peoples and nations for true independence, or what Wendt calls 'recognition', on one hand and structural pressures of the anarchic system on the other hand, a world state will naturally evolve. Wendt is rejecting Waltz's claim that international anarchy does make war, or its recurrence, *inevitable*, for "[i]nternational anarchy is [still] what states make of it".[33] The only thing that is *inevitable*, Wendt contends, is the formation of a formal world government – a truly new sovereign political entity, with constitutional authority over all nations. Moreover, since a world government is inevitable, Wendt argues, "[s]tates that pursue such policies will do better for themselves in the long run than those that take a Realist view. In short, better to 'get with the program' than wait till it gets to you".[34]

World government theorists are well aware of the great risks of world-state formation and familiar with common criticisms against it. As Daniel Deudney notes, before arguing for a 'federal-republican world nuclear government': "unlike previous governments, which could be escaped through emigration, or checked by other states, or ultimately overturned by revolt, a world government looms as a horrific totalitarian end of history".[35] Deudney, like Craig and Wendt, argues however that the driving force behind the world government project is the danger inherent to all-out thermonuclear war.

Conclusion

'We are what we are because we got that way' is a typical Kenneth Boulding aphorism. Over 350 years of war, rivalry, struggle for power and arms races between sovereign states paved the way into the atomic age in which the annihilation of the human race is a constant possibility. The question now is, as Waltz put it, "how can we get out of this mess without nuclear weapons exploding?".[36] Paradoxically, Waltz recommends that international power politics take its course in the hope that the fear of retaliation will prevent all-out nuclear war. However, as Martin Amis put it, the problem with nuclear deterrence is that "it can't last out the necessary timespan, which is roughly between now and the death of the sun".[37]

Therefore, theorists of the trust-building school try to transcend uncertainty and overcome the nuclear security dilemma through nuclear trust-building and cooperation. For both, the 'security community project' as well as the 'world government project', trust-building and cooperation will indeed play an important role in the future; but there are several theoretical and practical problems which remain unsolved at this stage. Theorists like Wheeler do not provide sufficient answers to the problem of distrust between nuclear-armed states. How can nuclear-armed states come together to build up institutions that solve problems of distrust in the first place without risking nuclear blackmail? The trust-building school cannot provide a sufficient answer partly because the concept of trust is under-theorized; it fails to explain trust-building in the absence of *generalized trust*.

World government theorists like Craig, Wendt and Deudney are more radical. For them, the only way out of the thermonuclear dilemma is by overcoming anarchic international politics through the creation of a world state. As Craig puts it, "in the nuclear age, normative solutions to the problem of anarchy invariably gravitate toward the logic of a world state".[38] Waltz's *spread* forecast, however, makes the objective of a world state less attainable as more nations acquire nuclear weapons.

However, since "intellectual muscles... have rarely been used since the end of the Cold War" regarding nuclear issues, these attempts by world government and trust-building theorists at providing fresh critical insight into our understanding of nuclear history are most welcome.[39] What they have in common is the belief that ideas (and *a fortiori* a theory) can have an effect on the world *created* by neo-realists like Waltz.[40] These theorists try to replace a MAD (mutual assured destruction) world with a sane one. In the words of Ken Booth: "there is always a dynamic interplay between image and reality in human relationships. If we insist upon old images, the future will naturally tend to replicate the past".[41]

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[1] See Waltz, K. N. 'The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better', Adelphi Paper 171 (London, International Institute of Strategic Studies, 1981), p. 1.

[2] Waltz, 'Spread of Nuclear Weapons', p. 1.

[3] For an opposing view see Mueller, J. 'The Essential Irrelevance of Nuclear Weapons: Stability in the Postwar World', *International Security*, 13 (1988), pp. 55-79.

[4] Waltz, 'Spread of Nuclear Weapons', p. 6.

[5] Waltz, 'Spread of Nuclear Weapons', p. 44.

[6] Waltz, K. N. *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1959), p. 188.

[7] For a detailed critical exposition of Waltz's 'third-image' theory see Suganami, H. *On the Causes of War* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996), Chs. 1 and 2; see also Suganami, H. 'Understanding Man, the State, and War', *International Relations*, 23 (2009) pp. 372-88.

[8] Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, p. 238.

[9] Craig, C. *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau and Waltz* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 131.

[10] See Craig, *Glimmer*, pp. 161-164; quote on p. 161. [11] Waltz, K. N. 'The Virtue of Adversity', *International Relations*, 23 (2009) p. 501 (my italics).

[12] See Sagan, S. D. and Waltz, K. N. *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed*, 2nd Edition (New York and London, W. W. Norton & Co, 2002), pp. 47-91; quote on p. 48.

[13] See Craig, C. *Destroying the Village: Eisenhower and Thermonuclear War* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1998), esp. Chapters 3-7.

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[16] Wheeler, N. J. 'Beyond Waltz's Nuclear World: More Trust May be Better', *International Relations*, 23 (2009) p.

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[17] Wheeler, 'Beyond Waltz's Nuclear World', p. 435.

[18] Wheeler, 'Beyond Waltz's Nuclear World', p. 428.

[19] See Wheeler, 'Beyond Waltz's Nuclear World', p. 435; for a more detailed account see Deutsch et al., *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience* (Princeton N.J., Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 5 ff.

[20] Wheeler, 'Beyond Waltz's Nuclear World', p. 436.

[21] Wheeler, 'Beyond Waltz's Nuclear World', p. 439.

[22] See Rathbun, B. C. 'Before Hegemony: Generalized Trust and the Creation and Design of International Security Organizations', *International Organization*, 65 (2011) pp. 243-73.

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[27] See Craig, C. and Ruzicka, J. 'Who's in, who's out?', *London Review of Books*, 34 (2012) p.1.

[28] Lu, C. 'World Government,' in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2006 Edition) edited by Edward N. Zalta; [online] available at plato.stanford.edu/entries/world-government/.

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[30] See Craig, *Glimmer*, pp. 171-72.

[31] Craig, *Glimmer*, p 172.

[32] Wendt, A. 'Why a World State Is Inevitable', *European Journal of International Relations*, 9 (2003) pp. 491-542.

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[37] Amis, M. *Einstein's Monsters* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1987), pp. 16-17.

[38] Craig, C. 'American Power Preponderance and the Nuclear Revolution', *Review of International Studies*, 35 (2009) p. 27.

[39] The quote is from Tertrais, B. 'Correspondence: Nuclear Myth-Busting', *Nonproliferation Review*, 16 (2009), p. 131.

[40] *Created* is used here to illustrate that these theories have not only *described*, but *in themselves* have created reality albeit not the one Waltz imagined.

[41] Booth, K. 'Security and emancipation', *Review of International Studies*, 17 (1991) p. 315.

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