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Waltz-ing with the Bomb: Good Hands, Bad Hands or No Hands?

Why have nuclear weapons become strategically irrelevant? According to Alyn Ware, it's because 1) they don't really deter opponents anymore, 2) today's security problems require multilateral solutions, and 3) an increasing number of defense strategies have become collective in nature.

By Alyn Ware for ISN

Kenneth Waltz, a giant in the field of International Relations and the founder of [Structural Realism](#), passed away in September last year, just one year after publishing [Why Iran Should Get the Bomb: Nuclear Balancing Would Mean Stability](#) - his final controversial defense of nuclear weapons. In this article, Waltz applied to the Middle East many of the same arguments which he advanced in his 1981 essay [Nuclear Weapons: More is Better](#). First, he argues nuclear weapons have provided, and continue to provide, national security for countries that possess them. In his view, if a country has nuclear weapons, it will not be attacked militarily in ways that threaten its manifestly vital interests.

Waltz then argues that the spread of nuclear weapons to additional countries might enhance rather than diminish regional and global security. In particular, the spread of nuclear weapons to Iran could balance the current nuclear monopoly in the Middle East and thus bring greater stability to the region.

Good Hands, Bad Hands

The controversy surrounding Waltz's most recent article was not that he was defending nuclear weapons per se. There are many academics, policy analysts and governments who would agree with Waltz that the possession of nuclear weapons by the major nuclear powers has enhanced national, regional and global security, and continues to do so. However, there was considerable opposition to Waltz's notion that nuclear weapons acquired by 'states of concern' like [Iran](#) and North Korea, could enhance regional and/or global security.

Accordingly, Waltz's position runs counter to a predominant perspective that nuclear weapons in the hands of the current nuclear-armed states - particularly those confirmed by the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) - is stabilizing, whereas the spread to other states would be destabilizing. NATO's [nuclear weapons doctrine](#), for example, holds that 'The supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies is provided by the strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance', but that it is important to 'fight proliferation' (i.e. others getting nuclear weapons) with both 'political means and military capabilities.'

In addition, some academics and nuclear-armed governments speak of 'responsible' nuclear-weapon states and 'irresponsible' states to establish a rationale for the possession of nuclear weapons by some but not others. The concept of 'good hands' versus 'bad hands' for nuclear weapons is a common theme, even if there is not complete consensus over which are good hands and which are bad. In fact, such consensus is probably impossible to achieve. One's perspective on which are good hands and which are bad depends on where one stands.

Consider the Middle East. An Israeli, cognizant of the Holocaust and the fact that most Arab states and Iran still don't recognize Israel, has some justification for perceiving an Israeli nuclear deterrent to be vital for security, and for perceiving nuclear weapons possessed by Iran to be threatening and destabilizing. An Iranian, remembering the fact that chemical weapons were used against his country in the not-so-distant past, and that both Israel and the US have threatened military attacks, has some justification for supporting the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran to create a 'responsible' deterrent and enhance the security of the region.

The Risk of Failure

If Waltz's basic rationale for nuclear deterrence is valid, then his arguments for a limited spread of nuclear weapons to provide balanced deterrence are more compelling than the 'good hands' versus 'bad hands' framework. If **some** states 'require' nuclear weapons for deterrence, then it is both logical for **others** to also 'require' them for their security, especially if they prevent aggression from other nuclear-armed states.

On the other hand, any 'failure' of nuclear deterrence, leading to nuclear-weapons-use, would create a catastrophic and unprecedented humanitarian and political disaster. The risk of such failure occurring is likely to increase as more states acquire nuclear weapons. These two realities provide not only a counter to Waltz's argument that more nuclear states may be better, but also a rationale to reject nuclear weapons altogether and establish a nuclear-weapons-free world. These realities suggest the need to move from the notion of 'good hands' and 'bad hands' for nuclear weapons, to 'no hands' for them.

This is part of the thinking that led Shultz, Perry, Nunn and Kissinger to release articles in the Wall Street Journal in [2007](#), [2008](#) and [2011](#) arguing that while nuclear deterrence had served the bipolar world of the latter 20th Century well, reliance upon nuclear weapons in a multipolar world 'is becoming increasingly hazardous and decreasingly effective.' However, they say that despite the new political realities, states continue to rely on nuclear weapons thereby making the achievement of a nuclear-weapons-free world unobtainable at the present time. They're not alone in their thinking. The 2010 [NATO Strategic Concept](#) echoed the position that a nuclear weapons-free world is desirable, but that political and security conditions have to be created to make this possible. Even U.S. President Obama in [putting forward a vision and commitment to a nuclear-weapons-free world \[AW1\]](#) in Prague, indicated that perhaps it would not be possible to achieve this in his lifetime.

Five Key Factors

However, an increasing number of academics and policy analysts also assert that nuclear weapons are no longer needed for security - if they ever were. Their arguments are clustered around five core principles:

Nuclear weapons don't deter: In [Five Myths About Nuclear Weapons](#) Ward Wilson argues that massive retaliation - or the threat of massive retaliation - does not coerce opponents or win wars. He offers a number of historical examples of the ineffective use of massive destruction with conventional weapons to demonstrate this point, including the 1941-44 siege of Leningrad and the 1945

fire-bombing of Dresden. In [Deterrence in the Age of Nuclear Proliferation](#) Shultz and others use historical examples of nuclear weapons failing to deter conflict. These include the Soviet moves into Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968), Korean and Vietnam wars, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Nuclear deterrence is flawed : In order to deter, there must be a perceived willingness to use nuclear weapons. This need to demonstrate can push adversaries close to the brink, as happened during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Accordingly, a range of factors in conflict situations, including misperception, miscalculation, faulty information, domestic politics and even psychological factors - could lead to a decision to use nuclear weapons. Indeed, the [Report of the International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament](#) notes that 'so long as any such weapons remain, it defies credibility that they will not one day be used, by accident, miscalculation or design.'

Globalisation has reduced the salience of national defense : Nuclear deterrence is a framework for protecting states (or groups of states) from the military aggression and territorial ambitions of others. Instead, globalisation has eroded the framework of discrete state entities, and changed the dynamic of resources and power to being primarily non-state alternatives. These include control over finance, trade, markets and communication systems. Consequently, this makes nuclear deterrence irrelevant to the protection of power or resources. In [A Good Framework for a Good Future](#), Jonathan Granoff explains the inter-relationships between nuclear-armed states like so:

'I buy gasoline for my car from a Russian concession in my neighborhood in the suburbs of Philadelphia; when my computer blinks I get help from a young person in India, probably Bangalore; and the money with which I pay for these goods and services is backed by loans from China, which produces many products we all use in our daily lives. In other words, our lives are deeply interconnected.'

Globalisation has increased capacity for alternative cooperative security: The latter part of the 20th Century and early part of the 21st Century has seen the rise of global methods and mechanisms - legal, political and economic - to deal with core security threats and international conflicts. These include the increased use of existing international courts such as the International Court of Justice; the establishment of additional courts and tribunals such as the Law of the Sea Tribunal, International Criminal Court and World Trade Organization (WTO) Dispute Settlements Body; a greater capacity for action by the UN Security Council to address threats to peace and acts of aggression; the adoption of an increasing number of international treaties and agreements on core security issues; and the development of smart (targeted) sanctions.

These global methods and mechanisms provide an increased capacity to deal with security threats, including threats arising from the risks of nuclear proliferation - without recourse to nuclear deterrence. In addition, there is a growing global awareness and sense of responsibility to each other that can ensure that leaders in our communities and nations turn more to such mechanisms rather than resorting to the threat or use of force. To reflect this, Angela Kane, UN High Representative for Disarmament, asserts that the conditions required to relinquish nuclear deterrence do not need to be created - [they already exist](#).

Core security issues in the 21st Century require cooperative multilateral approaches : [Parliamentary leaders](#) , amongst others, have noted that 'the threats to our planet - of climate change, poverty and war - can only be overcome by nations and the global community working in cooperation - something not possible while nations maintain large and expensive militaries and threaten to destroy each other [with nuclear weapons]'

Shultz et al echoed such sentiments by also arguing that in the new millennium there is the 'increasing realization that our common interests greatly exceed our differences,' and that there is 'a daunting new spectrum of global security threats' that require cooperation to address. 'These threats include chemical, biological and radiological weapons, catastrophic terrorism and cyber warfare, as well as natural disasters resulting from climate change or other environmental problems, and health-related crises.'

Real World Thinking

Waltz's arguments in favor of nuclear weapons may have been intellectually compelling and used by some states to justify the acquisition of nuclear weapons. However, their weakness is evidenced by the fact that the majority of the world's 192 states, even if they felt threatened by nuclear weapons, never embraced the nuclear deterrent 'logic'. Rather they opted not to join the risky nuclear club, even if such membership could bring some degree of status and political power.

Now, in an increasingly globalised world, any rationale for maintaining nuclear deterrence has eroded in the face of the increasing risks of a nuclear catastrophe, the increasing irrelevance of nuclear weapons to defend the new globalized forms of power and resources, and the increasing capacity to use cooperative security mechanisms to address current security issues. There should be thus no excuse for the reluctance of decision-makers in states that rely upon nuclear deterrence to reject those doctrines and begin the cooperative work for the verified prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons.

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