

Kenneth N. Waltz on NBC Weapons

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Summary

Kenneth N Waltz-R.I.P. (June 8, 1924-May 12, 2013).

The article is a collection of Kenneth N Waltz's views on NBC Weapons.

Kenneth N Waltz – a pioneer theorist of international relations – passed away on May 12, 2013 at the age of 88. He served as a member of the faculty at the University of California, Berkeley and Columbia University. Widely hailed for his foundational work in neo-realist school of international relations, Waltz's theorizing created a new paradigm which produced many other important works in the field. His monumental work '*Theory of International Politics*' outlined the key assumptions and approaches to the systematic study of international politics. He was equally revered for bringing the insights of neo-realists theory to bear upon some of important policy problems during the cold war and post cold war years. Waltz's views on issues like US involvement in Vietnam War, spread of nuclear weapons in the world, US invasion of Iraq and more recently on Iran's nuclear weapon programme have been widely argued and debated upon. He was a fierce critic of the Vietnam War and later opposed the so-called preemptive invasion of Iraq by US forces in 2003.

Waltz's views on WMD proliferation and especially the spread of nuclear weapons were radical; in an essay published in 1981, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May be Better*, Waltz argued, "Slow spread of nuclear weapons will promote peace and reinforce international stability."¹ He went on to outline in great detail why nuclear weapons enable peace and stability by stressing that "nuclear weapons make the cost of war seem frighteningly high and thus discourage states from starting any wars that might lead to the use of such weapons." He further explained that "states are unlikely to take great risks for minor gains and although war remains possible, the victory in war is too dangerous to fight for."²

Waltz strongly opposed the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. While rejecting the pre-emptive strategy of US forces in Iraq, Waltz asserted that, “we [US] have no reason to think that Saddam Hussein is about to (nuke) strike anybody - not anybody in the region, let alone Europe or the United States.”³ Waltz slammed the US State Department’s claim that Saddam Hussein might give away the nuclear weapons to the terrorists. Waltz cautioned that, “we don’t have to worry about Saddam Hussein doing that, because if any terrorist ever got weaponry that they could not well get from sources other than Iraq, we would say, ‘Saddam Hussein did it,’ and we’d slam him. He knows that.” Waltz also dispelled the worries that Saddam Hussein or the North Korean military junta will not be deterred once they acquire WMD capability. He believed that, rogue regimes have persistently made effort to acquire WMD capabilities to consolidate their regimes and they certainly would not want to share it with anybody.”⁴

Reiterating his reasoning on nuclear weapons in his famous recent essay in *Foreign Affairs*, *Why Iran Should Get the Bomb*, Waltz argued, “Tehran’s nuclear weapon capability would most likely restore stability to the Middle East region.” He pointed out that “The danger of a nuclear Iran has been grossly exaggerated” and “the debate surrounding it has been distorted by misplaced worries and fundamental misunderstandings of how states generally behave in the international system.”⁵ Waltz criticised the global anxiety about nuclear Iran by arguing that “(Calling) nuclear Iran a uniquely terrifying prospect, even an existential threat is typical of major powers, which have historically gotten riled up whenever another country has begun to develop a nuclear weapon of its own. Yet so far, every time another country has managed to shoulder its way into the nuclear club, the

other members have always changed tack and decided to live with it. In fact, by reducing imbalances in military power, new nuclear states generally produce more regional and international stability, not less.”⁶

Waltz was convinced about the deterrence value of WMDs like chemical and biological weapons in inter-state conflicts. He often cited the restraint exercised by Saddam Hussein in using chemicals and biological weapons in the Gulf War against US forces.⁷ Waltz explained the restraint exercised by states in non-use of chemical & biological weapons when he stated that, “WMDs make states cautious and ‘rogue states’ too have exercised restraint in the past.” He noted that “the weaker and the more endangered a state is, the less likely it is to engage in reckless behavior.”⁸

Scholars in Waltzian tradition too have explained the non-use of chemical and biological weapons despite many countries possessing the NBC capabilities including states that wish to use them covertly. Falkner et al. explained that the decision to use WMDs is determined solely by the risks calculations of potential aggressors.⁹ The restraint in state behaviour, as they argue, is guided by the logic of ‘threat of punishment’ which underlines the risks of retaliation in form of escalatory exchange of NBC weapons, which hold states back from using such weapons.¹⁰

Nevertheless, Waltz was skeptical that unlike nuclear weapons, the irregular groups and terrorists will be less deterred from using WMDs like biological and chemical weapons if they were to acquire it.¹¹ Waltz clearly understood the limitations of deterrence in case of non-state actors armed with chemical and bio-weapons when he observed that “deterrence does not cover this kind of situation”.¹²

Although Waltz was particularly optimistic about the role of nuclear weapons in global politics, his views about the utility of slow spread of nuclear weapons drew him widespread criticism. The rapid spread of WMDs remains a frightening prospect for the global non-proliferation community and the spread of WMDs and their use either by state or non-state actors is strongly controlled through set of global norms and institutions. While, the non-proliferation regime would continue to be a pre-eminent force in world politics for years to come, Waltz will be remembered most importantly for setting an alternate discourse on non-proliferation that brought him followers and foes in equal measure.

Endnotes:

- ¹ Kenneth N. Waltz (1981), "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better", Adelphi Paper No. 171, London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, URL: <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/waltz1.htm>
- ² Ibid
- ³ Kenneth Waltz Interview: Conversations with History; Institute of International Studies, UC Berkeley, URL: <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people3/Waltz/waltz-con6.html>
- ⁴ Ibid
- ⁵ Waltz, Kenneth N. (2012), "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb: Nuclear Balancing Would Mean Stability", Foreign Affairs, July/August 2012, URL: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/137731/kenneth-n-waltz/why-iran-should-get-thebomb>
- ⁶ ibid
- ⁷ See, Kenneth Waltz Interview
- ⁸ Waltz, Kenneth N. (1995), "Peace, Stability and Nuclear Weapons", University of California, Berkeley
- ⁹ Falkenrath, Newman and Thayer (2004), "Americas Achilles Heel Nuclear Biological and Chemical Terrorism and Covert Attack" in

Art, Robert J., and Waltz, Kenneth N. (Eds.), "The use of force: military power and international politics", Rowman and Littlefield: London, pp.463-468

- ¹⁰ Ibid
- ¹¹ Kenneth Waltz Interview,
- ¹² Kenneth Waltz Interview