Ryan Carpenter

POLS 370.01 – Cyberwar, Robots, & Conflict

Nuclear Weapon Proliferation

Ward Wilson’s essay, The Gordian Knot: Moral Debate and Nuclear Weapons provide an incredibly interesting and factual interpretation of the moral battle that the development and deployment of nuclear weapons have created on the world stage. Due to the destructive power and immense level of responsibility that world leaders must carry when given the keys to a nuclear arsenal, I would have to agree that humanity is faced with a stout moral dilemma that does not necessarily require a special sense of morality as Wilson states (2013, 1). Now, in modern times, one could make the argument that these weapons of mass destruction are now more of a figurehead with the purpose of deterrence. But where the issue lies is through the proliferation of this immensely dangerous and destructive technology.

Wilson’s argument is largely based around the impracticality and myth that has been created around the use of nuclear weapons. Through the development of nuclear weapons, civilization has observed an almost categorical change in war. Although through history we can cite that this relatively new destructive technology has not shifted the tides of conflicts such as the Japanese surrender of WWII and certainly did not play a part during The United States war in Vietnam or the Soviet Union failed Afghanistan campaign. Instead these weapons have created an overcompensated level of pure destruction with an impracticality towards usage. As Wilson states “The biggest hammer is not necessarily the one you need for a job (especially if it is so big you cannot lift it)” (Wilson 2013, 7).

Impracticality is the biggest hurdle faced with the dilemma of deploying these weapons of mass destruction and Ward Wilson’s interpretation of this issue is spot on (2013, 8). With weapons that can cause such pure destruction in a matter of seconds, it is nearly impossible to deploy such technology on the battlefield without inflicting almost mutual damage on your own military forces. Which in turn leaves the only potential targets as areas rich in economic resources like war factories or supporting factories, but also, more importantly, densely populated areas of civilians with little to no ties to the conflict at hand. History has shown this not to be a contributing factor to the outcome of truly any war waged on planet earth. Where Wilson is lacking and almost missing the point is through the risk of proliferation and the acquisition of this dangerous technology falling into the wrong hands. We currently see this issue playing out first hand with Iran in modern times. Iran possessing nuclear weapons poses a massive risk to the free world as we know it. This has been widely argued, specifically during a 2007 debate between two political scientists Scott Sagan and Kenneth Waltz. As Scott Sagan states “proliferation fatalism and deterrence optimism interact in a particularly diabolical manner” (Sagan 2007, 4). Iran creates a very tense and hostile situation as there are three major dangers that the acquisition of nuclear weapons can create. First, the promotion of aggression, second, and in my opinion most dangerous, the threat of theft by terrorist organizations; and Finally, the credible issue of loose control and sale to said terrorist organizations. “All three of these problems occurred when Pakistan got nuclear weapons” (Sagan 2007, 5).

All in all, nuclear technology in the form of weaponry has created this near paradox of moral ambiguity. What is right and what is wrong is purely up to the beholder and that is truly terrifying from a civilian standpoint. World leaders now are faced with such great power of destruction at the tips of their fingers that one can’t help but fear Hollywood like an apocalyptic scenario through nuclear fallout. But luckily enough history has shown that these weapons share an incredibly large amount of impracticality tactically, logistically, and morally. Instead these weapons of mass destruction are viewed in modern times as not only a deterrent, but a figure of power for nations. The real worldly issue is not the fact that this technology has been developed, but rather the concerns surrounding proliferation and acquisition of this deadly force falling into the wrong hands.