

# *Rationality or Impunity? Revisiting Kenneth Waltz*

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## **North Korea's Recent Nuclear Weapons Threat: Rationality or Impunity? Revisiting Kenneth Waltz**

Pyongyang's third nuclear test early this year prompted the United Nations to pass Resolution 2094, condemning the test and calling for immediate cessation of all its nuclear activities. This has made North Korea to nullify its 1953 armistices with South Korea and has vowed to restart its Yongbyon nuclear reactor, and has further threatened war with Seoul and Washington.



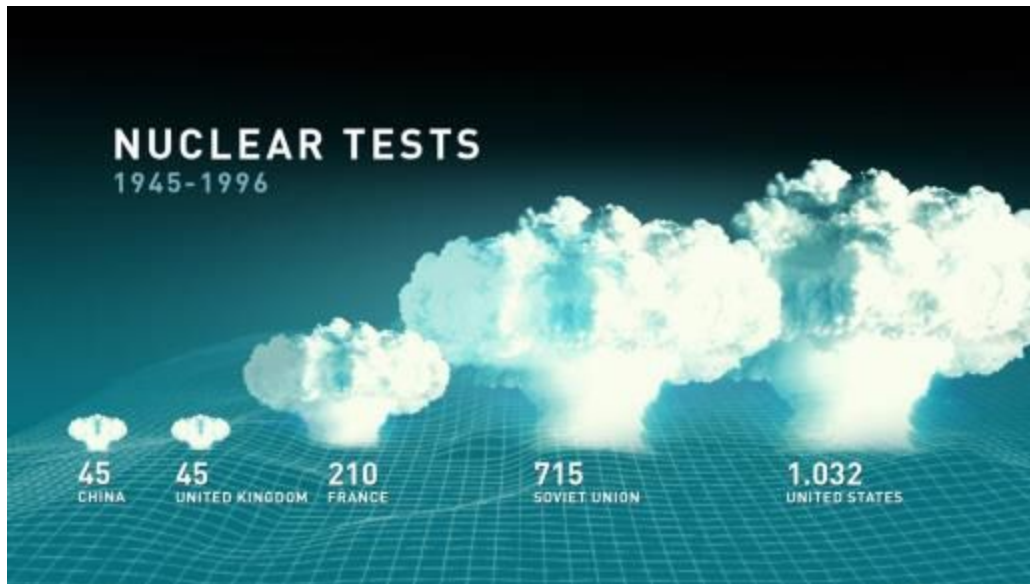
In his 1981 Adelphi paper, "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better", Kenneth Waltz argued that the spread of nuclear weapons is a positive development. The existence of second strike nuclear-arsenals discourages states from starting wars that might lead to the use of nuclear weapons. He writes: "in a conventional world, one is uncertain about surviving or being annihilated and with more nuclear states the world will have a promising future"<sup>[1]</sup>. Thus Waltz sees nuclear weapons as instruments of peace because to him

(structural realist) states are unitary, rational actors and that states seek survival above all else; a case which I seek to revisit.

Though Waltz saw nuclear deterrence during the cold war as the reason behind the avoidance of World War III, Steven Pinker counters this argument by asserting that if it were indeed correct to credit nuclear weapons with the avoidance of World War III, there would be grounds for serious concern. He continues and argues that, such a structure of peace would be "a fool's paradise, because an accident, a miscommunication, or an air force general obsessed with precious bodily fluids could set off an apocalypse". For Pinker, memories of the devastation experienced in World War II after the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima did discourage World War III but not nuclear deterrence or rationality.

Rogue states like North Korea have successfully used their nuclear weapons to act with impunity in the international system. The international community has repeatedly

condemned its actions e.g. the torpedoing of the South Korean vessel, the shelling of a South Korean Island and the recent nuclear attack threats, yet there has been no major consequences for the North Korean government. Thus it can be argued that Waltz's rationality claims have been replaced not only by irrationality but by impunity. How far will the impunity go? It's a question for another day. This impunity does cause human insecurity which entails freedom from fear. A freedom which South Korean's are being deprived of by the government in Pyongyang, due to its frequent threats of nuclear attacks.



The only threats that can threaten the survival of a state its total annihilation and nuclear weapons is a good it. The question asked by Waltz still persists, "how can we get out of this mess without nuclear weapons exploding?"<sup>[ii]</sup> . The only way out of this mess it's not the Waltzian claim of deterrence that will cause fear and prevent an all-out nuclear war, as Martin Amis argued, "it can't last out the necessary time span, which is roughly between now and the death of the sun"<sup>[iii]</sup>.

Though many ways to get out of this nuclear mess have been proposed, I tend to agree with world government theorists (Craig, Wendt and Deudney) who see the only way out of this nuclear dilemma is overcoming the anarchical international system through the creation of a world State. This will be unattainable if we stick with Waltz's theoretical claims.

After revisiting Waltz, it's clear that a new and fresh critical thinking about the impunity rather than rationality in which states that possess nuclear weapons act, needs to be given a closer look. I am certain that this "Nuclear-impunity thinking" will replace Waltz's MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction) world with a sane and cooperative one.

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[i] Waltz, k. N. "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better", Adelphi Paper 171 (London, International Institute of Strategic Studies, 1981),pp.1-44

[ii] Waltz, K.N. "Nuclear Myths and Political Realities", American Political Science Review, 84 (1990) P.740

[iii] Amis, M "Einstein's Monsters" London, Jonathan Cape, 1987