
The Path to a World without War

Relevance of a Global Social Contract?

JAWAHAR BHAGWAT

The doomsday clock set up in 1947 after World War II and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is now only one and a half minutes away from the midnight hour. The Ukraine proxy conflict with Russia on one side and Ukraine supported by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) on the other threatens to escalate into a world war and a possible nuclear conflagration. Many intellectuals, scientists, and a few politicians, including Jawaharlal Nehru, have endeavoured to promote the cause of disarmament, especially a nuclear weapons-free world.

Sundeep Waslekar, the president of the think-tank “Strategic Foresight Group” and author of the books—*The New World Order; An Inclusive World: In Which the West, Islam and the Rest Have a Stake; Cost of Conflict in the Middle East* co-authored with Ilmas Futehally; *Eka Dishecha Shodh*; and *Big Questions of Our Time*, co-authored with Ilmas Futehally—delves into the discourse of many concerned scientists, academics, and intellectuals regarding the state of the world and the rush towards increasingly sophisticated weapons, which are threatening global peace.

Threat of Human Extinction

The author commences his discourse in Chapter 1 titled “Approaching Midnight: The Threat of Human Extinction” by emphasising the existential threat hanging over the world like the Sword of Damocles due to the spiralling arms race. This, according to the author, is exacerbated by the burgeoning interface between artificial intelligence (AI), nuclear weapons, and biotechnology that can lead to a global war involving weapons of mass destruction by accident or intent. The chapter details the evolution of various weapons, including low-yield nuclear weapons and

BOOK REVIEWS

A World without War: The History, Politics and Resolution of Conflict by Sundeep Waslekar, Gurugram: HarperCollins India, 2022; pp 324, ₹599.

hypersonic missiles. The author argues that these weapons “deployed in hair-trigger alert positions make the world’s future unpredictable.” Waslekar also draws attention to the deployment of killer robots and the recommendation of AI experts to introduce a new treaty banning lethal autonomous weapon systems. He also states that using AI in decision support systems to launch intercontinental ballistic missiles, hypersonic, and other missiles may also increase the threat of war. The author notes that there is a propensity to use technology for evil rather than good, and he supports this with the use of AI to launch a cyberattack to render the nuclear weapons capacity of the enemy ineffective, which could, however, result in the rival adopting a pre-emptive attack. Waslekar correctly highlights the many close calls regarding the use of nuclear weapons averted just in time by fortunate human interference that took place after World War II to support his argument. However, when mentioning the threat of bioweapons, he mainly talks about China and fails to mention bioweapon laboratories supported by the United States’s (us) Pentagon in various locations worldwide.

Similarly, he talks about the “deep state” (interest groups) in certain countries influencing state policy without any accountability to the public, only with reference to Russia and Ukraine and ignores the accountability of the us towards world peace by its expansion of the NATO (a process that was set in motion in 1994 according to official us

archives, but had already agreed upon by President George W Bush even in 1990), and massive military spending (40% of the total world defence expenditures and more than the following 10 countries put together according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute data from 2022). According to the official us National Security Archive, President Bill Clinton attempted to have his cake both ways, expanding NATO and partnering with Russia at the same time resulting in Boris Yeltsin’s “cold peace” blow-up at Clinton in Budapest in December 1994. William Perry, President Clinton’s Secretary of Defense, almost resigned on the issue of NATO expansion. He, however, held on, but later regretted that he “didn’t fight more effectively for the delay of the NATO decision.” As he wrote in 2015,

“The descent down the slippery slope began, I believe, with the premature NATO expansion,” the “downsides of early NATO membership for Eastern European nations were even worse than I had feared.”

The author’s statement,

It proves that so long as leaders like Biden govern major countries, we can hope for stability, but a future Trump or a future Hitler can dismantle the arms control regime in a jiffy and invite Armageddon,

does not reflect objectivity, particularly in light of the refusal of the us to even discuss Russia’s draft treaties for a new security architecture in Europe and is an insistence on an open door for Ukraine into NATO, a continuation of the policies set up in motion by President Clinton in the early 1990s in direct contravention of the promises given to Mikhail Gorbachev to elicit his support in disbanding of the Warsaw Pact, dismantling of the Berlin Wall, and reunification of Germany. The author also does not explicitly mention that all Russian withdrawals from arms control treaties were precipitated by the us abrogating its treaty obligations first.

Menace of Nationalism

Chapter 2, titled “Dark Times: Menace of Nationalism,” highlights the rise of nationalism. The author argues that war is a matter of human choice, and we

should not have implicit faith in our leaders. He states that the Hindu principle of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, or one world, one family necessitates the elimination of lethal weapons. To support his argument, he invokes Swami Vivekananda, the Buddhist philosophy of non-violence, Islamic scholars, including Ayatollah Khamenei and the Parliament of the World's Religions. Waslekar discusses the contributions of Ronald Reagan and Gorbachev in signing various arms control agreements and by Willy Brandt in initiating the policy of "détente." The author criticises Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, who, he argues, are allies in furthering violent nationalism. He discusses nationalism in some nuclear weapons-armed countries such as the us, China, Russia, the United Kingdom (UK), and North Korea. Israel, a de facto nuclear weapons state, is strangely left out of the discourse.

It is inexplicable how the author mentions the "Russki Mir Foundation," an organisation to spread Russian culture and language, as an instrument to spread strident Russian nationalism but ignores the us Congress-funded so-called non-governmental organisation, "National Endowment for Democracy," which is known for interfering in the internal affairs of other countries and support of colour revolutions. Similarly, he does not mention the us-controlled World Bank and the International Monetary Fund which are simply an expression of us nationalism to enrich the us at the expense of other countries, as brought out by Michael Hudson in his book, *Super Imperialism*.

He quotes Albert Einstein, Rabindranath Tagore, Sydney Harris, Erich Fromm, and others in stating that nationalism is a disease. Waslekar states,

So long as our mental frameworks, national pride and institutional arrangements are organised in such a way ... we will continue to live in the shadow of an apocalypse.

The counter to the author's argument is that as long as certain nations try to coerce others into adopting their values or what is called "the Liberal Delusion" by John Mearsheimer, political leaders in the affected countries will always utilise this to galvanise forces against this interference.

So, the powers of nationalism can only be softened by a policy of non-interference and mutual respect. The author's arguments in this chapter are diluted by his failure to mention the involvement of the us in triggering Russian nationalism and the Ukraine conflict, as written about by Western academics and intellectuals like Stephen Cohen, John Mearsheimer, Jeffrey Sachs, and Noam Chomsky, who have been largely ignored by the mainstream media controlled by corporate interests.

War, a Choice

In Chapter 3, titled "In Twilight Hours: War, a Choice," the author advocates that we need to move from "confrontation to cooperation and compassion." To support his hypothesis, he gives the example of Switzerland, Iceland, and Uruguay, countries which have eschewed wars. Waslekar analyses the influence of Thucydides and Kautilya and quotes the latter to state that "for the master strategist war, in effect, is the option of last resort." He criticises the realist theory of international relations propounded by Hans Morgenthau.

Waslekar quotes extensively from Einstein and M K Gandhi and the Russell-Einstein manifesto calling for the legal abolition of war. Waslekar also cites another book, *On Human Conflict: The Philosophical Foundations of War and Peace* published in 2019 by American philosopher Lou Marinoff to support his hypothesis that war is not innate to human nature. The chapter concludes with the author stating that if wars are avoided, the advancement of human civilisation could be assured.

Where Peace Dares

A scene from the 1983 television film, *The Day After*, is the introduction to Chapter 4 titled "Dawn on the Horizon: Where Peace Dares." In this chapter, the author enumerates the effects of a nuclear war. His main argument is that it will affect the entire planet, and he wonders whether ordinary people realise the ramifications of a nuclear conflict. According to Waslekar, most people are seduced by "weaponised hyper-nationalism." He states that ordinary people should be

more worried about the effect of a nuclear holocaust, ignoring the reality that even in the advanced nations, the top 1% have been getting richer and the rest of the population, including the poor, worse off. Struggling to meet their basic needs, they have little time for activism. While supporting his advocacy of leaders mobilising support for past glory/illusion of creating a great nation, he gives the examples of Pope Urban II, Niccolò Machiavelli, Adolf Hitler, and Slobodan Milosevic. Missing from the list is the example of the us, which has been the initiator or supporter of the greatest number of conflicts since World War II and into the 21st century. He repeats what was stated by Paul Kennedy in his 1988 book, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, that "no empire, no state, lasts forever—however grandiose the arsenal it may possess," expectedly leaving out any analysis of its relevance to the us.

This prescient observation was not popular when Kennedy made it because the intellectual world seemed enraptured by Francis Fukuyama's end-of-history thesis. Kennedy's cogent argument, not popular at the time, was that the us was likely to fall into the same trap as other great powers before it because they could not afford the military expenditures they were incurring. The chapter describes various peace movements and their role in influencing treaties on the limitation of nuclear weapons signed first between John F Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev and later between Reagan and Gorbachev. Waslekar states that such peace movements are essential if disarmament is to take place.

Shaping Peace, Preventing Wars

An ode to his alma mater Oxford University is the beginning of Chapter 5, "Before Daylight: Shaping Peace, Preventing Wars." His idea is that this university was and is a place for the discussion of ideas, and that civilisation is a collaborative effort. Waslekar rightfully gives an example of the Arab world 1,000 years ago serving as a protector of ideas and innovations from different civilisations. He then states that this moved to Europe because the Mongols ransacked Baghdad in the

13th century. The author then discusses the evolution of the concept of “Federation of States” by Dante Alighieri, Émeric Crucé, and Charles-Irénée Castel.

Waslekar then invokes Immanuel Kant’s idea of “perpetual peace” to reiterate his thesis that rulers, especially authoritarian rulers (like the kind found in Russia and China), support wars, while the people want peace. However, he contradicts himself in this chapter by admitting that even popular democracies like the us, the uk, India, Israel, and France, which are democracies, have waged wars with popular support. His understanding of democracy is either idealistic or incomplete and does not take into account the influence of oligarchies who control the electoral process by virtue of electoral funding and the mainstream media. This has been documented by various political scientists commencing with C Wright Mill’s 1956 book, *The Power Elite*, and more recently, J A Winters and Benjamin Page’s *Oligarchy in the United States* (2009) and Salvador Santino F Regilme, Jr’s *Constitutional Order in Oligarchic Democracies: Neoliberal Rights versus Socio-Economic Rights* (2019).

Waslekar analyses Gandhi’s and Einstein’s proposed federation of international states, the functioning of the League of Nations, and the United Nations (UN). He states that the latter has not been fulfilling its core responsibility of peace and security in relation to the pursuit of its development agenda. The author convincingly argues that the UN is in urgent need of reform due to the veto power held by the members of the security council. He ends the chapter on the note that a global contract is necessary as a replacement for the societal social contract within national boundaries.

Global Social Contract or Mutual Respect?

In the concluding chapter, “Mooring at Last: A World without War,” the author elucidates his vision of a “global social contract.” He reiterates the known argument that nuclear weapons make it impossible to differentiate between civilian and military targets. Waslekar advocates that the general population must force their leaders to agree to

eliminate all weapons of mass destruction (wmd), and to agree to rules of war when using conventional weapons. To support his views, he gives the example of the spread of viruses/biotechnology and the opinions expressed by well-known academics such as Stephen Hawking and others about the warnings regarding AI, because both technologies could be used to reinforce wmd.

Here again, his argument is weakened by his analysis that the Gates Foundation is an eminent institution that gave a prophetic warning regarding the pandemic in 2019, and this warning was largely ignored. Independent researchers, including the European Union-hosted COVID-19 summit in 2023, have criticised the involvement of private entities in the management of the pandemic and in the production of vaccines. The author advocates that his global social contract would require a supranational architecture requiring direct communication with people around the world and expressing the general will of humanity. This would mean dual loyalty of an individual—to the state and another to preserve our civilisation. What the author fails to state or chooses to ignore is that the internet is either controlled by Big Tech or by governments, as in the case of China. Even in India, internet services are shut down by the government when necessary.

Waslekar proposes a third Hague Conference to consider the elimination of all wmd. He acknowledges that his ideas may seem utopian in the present, but offers the example of President Kennedy and Russian leader Khrushchev, whose ideas for disarmament could have transformed the world. However, he fails to mention that their discourse was bound by mutual respect and an acknowledgement of the balance of power,

which resulted in the resolution of the Cuban crisis. Notwithstanding that, he subtly acknowledges the danger that a peace plan may encounter, as in the case of the assassination of President Kennedy. This principle is missing from the geopolitical rivalry between the collective West and Russia/China today. For example, Ukraine backtracked from the draft agreement with Russia in April 2022 at the behest of the us and the uk.

Despite all its generalisations and a perspective influenced by the mainstream Western media, the book is a welcome academic exercise and an addition to the literature on disarmament. Its argument would have been more convincing if the author had also considered the views of “cancelled” (or boycotted by the mainstream media/academia) Western academics/intellectuals, as Noam Chomsky put it in a recent interview. Similarly, the author’s analysis of Russia and China is not compelling as it fails to take into account their leadership’s logical reaction to the flagrant violation of the broken promise “not one inch Eastwards” and the written “One China” policy of 50 years ago, respectively.

In spite of that, this book is recommended reading for all politicians, bureaucrats, and military officers dealing with the nuclear/wmd command structure and disarmament issues, and also university students majoring in international relations/peace and conflict studies for its broad overview of the philosophy of war, dangers associated with wmd, and international arms limitation treaties.

Jawahar Bhagwat (jawahar.bhagwat@gmail.com) is a visiting faculty at the Northern Arctic Federal University, Russia. He served in the Indian Navy for over 25 years.

EPW Index

An author-title index for *EPW* has been prepared for the years from 1968 to 2012. The PDFs of the Index have been uploaded, year-wise, on the *EPW* website. Visitors can download the Index for all the years from the site. (The Index for a few years is yet to be prepared and will be uploaded when ready.)

EPW would like to acknowledge the help of the staff of the library of the Indira Gandhi Institute for Development Research, Mumbai, in preparing the index under a project supported by the RD Tata Trust.