

INTERVIEWS

# A World Without War: Where courage and effort flourish in pursuit of peace



Sundeep Waslekar, president, Strategic Foresight Group. Credit: Special arrangement

Synopsis

In the realm of thought-provoking literature, Sundeep Waslekar's book *A World Without War* dissects the history of war, and the political, economic, and technological factors that power it, from early human societies to the present day. Providing deep insights and contrarian ways for conflict resolution, Waslekar unequivocally argues that war is not inevitable but a choice some powerful humans make.

*"They won't fear it until they understand it... And they won't understand it until they use it"*

The dialogue resonates with the perplexing duality at the heart of the movie *Oppenheimer*. This cinematic portrayal of J Robert Oppenheimer, the enigmatic figure known as the 'father of the atomic bomb' or 'American Prometheus,' plunges into the depths of his internal conflict. His aspiration to harness atomic energy for the greater good during wartime clashes starkly with the potential **cataclysmic toll** it unleashes on the world.

Within the realm of thought-provoking literature,



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there's another book that warrants discussion in tandem with this movie — **A World Without War** written by **Sundeep Waslekar**.


The Doomsday Clock is regulated by the Science and Security Board of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. As of January 2023, the board adjusted the clock's hands forward, primarily due to the escalating risks posed by the conflict in **Ukraine**. At present, the clock is positioned at 90 seconds to midnight, marking its closest proximity to a global catastrophe.

So, the million-lives question is: Is a world without war possible?


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**"The cost of a war is not only to be understood in terms of death, destruction and military expenditure. There are many other costs – of a psychological, environmental, diplomatic, cultural, and educational nature."**

*— Extract from A World Without War, By Sundeep Waslekar*

conversation with the author.

**Why are we discussing peace when it appears that the world has once again embraced war?**

While drafting the **Normandy Manifesto**, which I co-authored with four Nobel Peace Prize laureates and a philosopher, I came to realise that their

Edited excerpts from a

concern for the continuity of human civilisation is profoundly genuine and deeply ingrained.

In June 2019, the six of us signed the manifesto in Caen, situated in France's Normandy region. This historical location, a witness to countless wars over millennia, served as the backdrop for our mission: to present the *Normandy Manifesto*, a call for global peace.

It's akin to a collective experience of the Titanic disaster. At 11:45 pm, a grand celebration unfolded aboard the Titanic, with no one willing to acknowledge any problems. However, at midnight, disaster struck in the form of an iceberg collision. This event led to the tragic loss of over half the passengers.

This analogy illustrates our current state. Despite the fact that nine states possess over 13,000 nuclear weapons, arms-control treaties are being disbanded, and there's the threat of lethal pathogens and artificial intelligence (AI) weaponisation. We continue to exist in a state of denial. We are not just functioning as alarmists. We are aiming to raise awareness.

## "Wars lead to the destruction of the civilisation."

— *Extract from A World Without War, by Sundeep Waslekar*

**Why should we be really concerned about the use of nuclear weapons**

### **with artificial intelligence?**

Nuclear weapons with AI are a deadly combination.

In December 2019, as the global Christmas festivities were underway, Russia strategically positioned the lethal Avangard missiles within the southern Urals' Orenburg Region.

These hypersonic missiles, moving at 27 times the speed of sound, are impervious to radar detection and possess the capacity to transport a nuclear warhead payload of two megatons. The missile autonomously determines its flight path, employing artificial intelligence for trajectory detection. This implies that unless directly controlled by military commanders on the ground, the missile becomes unstoppable.

Three months later, in the midst of March 2020, the US conducted a test of their own hypersonic missile, known as HAWC (Hypersonic Air-breathing Weapon Concept). This occurred during the ongoing battle against Covid-19. If you recall, in February, nations began imposing lockdowns sequentially, leading to suspended flights and mandatory mask mandates. Amidst this lockdown, the world grappled with strategies to safeguard itself from the threat of Covid-19.

During July 2022, China unveiled footage showcasing the most potent hypersonic missile referred to as the 'aircraft carrier killer'.

The true competition among Russia, the US, and China revolved around the hypersonic missile domain. These three major nations engaged in a fierce race to develop hypersonic missiles from 2020 to 2022.

**"There is an underlying relationship between the will to spend (military expenditure) and the intent to kill."**

*— Extract from A World Without War, by Sundeep Waslekar*

The second thing that happened during this period was the integration of AI into military operations

by governments. There is always a risk of war, when advanced AI is merged with cyber technologies and command systems, particularly in nuclear command and control. This convergence creates the possibility of launching cyberattacks that could simulate an invasion.

AI has the capability to fabricate a facade where innocent parties seem to be under attack, even when no actual harm is inflicted. Manipulation of cyber technologies creates a dangerous potential in this context.

**Does the use of artificial interventions and cyber technologies in military operations contribute to an escalation in lethality?**

The US has initiated a new strategy: deploying its smaller nuclear bombs. The nuclear bombs used in Hiroshima and Nagasaki were 15 kilotons. Nowadays, these bombs range from 100 kilotons to 10,000 kilotons. Under this approach,

introducing small bombs is an attempt to legitimise their use. This is a paradox of minimal capacity exposure – lowering capacity to encourage usage.

Former President of the United States Donald J Trump introduced this strategy to sidestep retaliation fears. President of Russia **Vladimir Putin** has followed suit, threatening to use small nuclear weapons to target areas like Kyiv, though this has environmental consequences.

Earth-penetrating weapons are another innovation. Detonating a small bomb about five feet underground can increase its destructiveness by 20 times.

Despite reducing the number of nuclear weapons since the 1980s, mankind found creative ways to destroy the world.

Also, it's important to highlight that every arms-control treaty, except one, has been abolished. This gradual dismantling commenced around 2002, during junior Bush's presidency. Specifically, he nullified the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002, paving the way for subsequent treaties to be dismantled one by one.

Ironically, the world was more secure during the Cold War due to multiple safeguards and constraints.

**When you mentioned in the book that "we're blinded by hyper-nationalism," could you elaborate on what exactly that statement entails?**

Albert Einstein said, 'Nationalism is an infantile disease. It is the measles of mankind'.

Even Rabindranath Tagore vehemently opposed nationalism, firmly rejecting it. His cautionary note about the potential for the nationalist ideology to lead to the abrupt and violent demise of nations remains pertinent today.

Both in the present and historically, the most popular reason and the predominant factor driving wars has been nationalism and a sense of national pride. It's often used to justify engaging in warfare by stating it's for the protection of our national interests or honor. This isn't dissimilar from the strategies employed by Hitler in Germany.

**"The glory of our nation is what matters the most. We are willing to sacrifice life and annihilate humankind so that the nation's flag can fly high in the middle of the graveyard that our planet is becoming."**

*— Extract from A World Without War, by Sundeep Waslekar*

**To what extent can we attribute the rise of**

### **nationalism to the phenomenon of globalisation?**

When discussing globalisation, what we find in reality is that a significant majority of global trade involves a mere 40 prominent nations. This means that out of the total 193 countries worldwide, around 150 countries have limited influence on global trade.

When considering global investments, again it becomes apparent that approximately 40 to 50 countries play a significant role. This essentially serves as a representation of gaining access to markets. It's a measure of how many countries permit foreign capital to enter their markets.

Without a doubt, this type of globalisation contributes to inequality and generates a sense of exclusion among people. So, these structural differences will always be there.

### **Does the concept of courage, bravery, and success primarily originate from warfare, or has it also been attributed to those who excel in times of peace?**

Mahatma Gandhi pioneered the idea of a global federation comprising liberated nations relinquishing arms, thereby embracing harmonious coexistence.

In the present day, certain countries are completely abandoning weaponry. Their intention is to evade military conflict and even reject possession of warfare tools. Among the 193 UN countries, 23 have forsaken military capabilities, choosing a non-militaristic approach. These nations rely on diplomacy for security instead of armed protection.

Among these, Panama, known for the Panama Canal, stands out. Despite being a pivotal route for almost half of the trade between North America and Asia, controlling a substantial portion of trade between these prosperous continents, Panama remains without a standing military force.

Additionally, there's Switzerland, which possesses a nominal military force.

Among the 193 countries, 123 nations passed a UN resolution in 2017, advocating for the ban on the utilisation and creation of nuclear weapons. This demonstrates a strong stance against nuclear armaments.

Taking it a step further, out of these 193 countries, 170 allocate defense expenditure of less than 1 million dollars. They prioritise social welfare over weaponry.

A visual inspection of the global map reveals that the majority of nations aspire for peaceful coexistence. This sentiment is shared by the majority, with only around 22 to 25 wealthy and influential countries pursuing different priorities.

### **Can you elaborate on your understanding of the term 'global ethics'?**

So, ethics are all about preferences. When we are talking about global ethics, you have individual choices... You have community preferences...and then you have national preferences.

There are various philosophical traditions across the world that delve into the realm of global ethics. The idea of coexistence is central to this exploration.

Examples include the Indian philosophy encapsulated by Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, which underscores the world as a family. Additionally, the African concept of Ubuntu emphasises interconnectedness with the maxim 'I am because we are.' Japanese philosophy, represented by figures like Daisaku Ikeda, also promotes embracing global citizenship, valuing creation, and fostering creative coexistence.

I believe in humanity.

**Five references to nuclear risk in popular culture suggested by Sundeep Waslekar.**



1.  
Doomsday

**"The phased elimination of the weapons of final destruction is only the first step needed to build a secure world."**

— *Extract from A World Without War, by Sundeep Waslekar*

ClockCurrent Time - 2023 - Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists ([thebulletin.org](https://thebulletin.org))

2. *Oppenheimer* (movie)

3. *Artificial Escalation*, a short film on YouTubeArtificial Escalation - YouTube

4. *Dr Strangelove* (classic movie)

5. *To End All Wars: A Story of Loyalty and Rebellion, 1914-1918* – a book by Adam Hochschild, published by Mariner Books

#### **About Sundeep Waslekar**

Sundeep Waslekar, the author of *A World Without War*, is the president of Strategic Foresight Group, an international think tank located in Mumbai established by him in 2002. Currently, he is involved in leading discussions about nuclear risks among the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.

Furthermore, Waslekar is a senior research fellow at Oxford University's Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflicts. He has been practicing Track II diplomacy since the 1990s, engaging in informal and non-official interactions between private citizens or groups to address conflicts. His mediation efforts have extended to various nations in South Asia and beyond.

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