

## Nuclear Weapons And Foreign Policy (Henry Kissinger)

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**Kissinger, Henry. *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*. Routledge, 2019.**

When Robert J. Oppenheimer immortalized the phrase “Now, I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds” from the Bhagavad Gita, he essentially drew parallels with ancient Greek mythology and its ensemble of cunningly devious Gods who would sometimes punish mortals by fulfilling their wishes in perverted ways, much like how the nuclear age unravels itself in modern times with promises of assuring access to infinite sources of energy while symbolizing a cornucopia of mankind’s destructive capabilities. Nuclear stockpiling, an integral facet of contemporary geostrategic thinking since the 1950s, has left nations teetering at the precipice of absolute annihilation, held back by an ‘uneasy armistice’ (Kissinger, 1957) founded on the probability of mutually assured destruction.

Henry Kissinger’s work titled ‘Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy’ represents an attempt at amalgamating force with diplomacy in a nuclear era, at a particular juncture of history when the Cold War was beginning to take shape as a defining period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In classic *Realpolitik* fashion, Kissinger commences by stating – “It is the task of strategic doctrine to translate power into policy” – setting the tone for the rest of the manuscript as it highlights the imperativeness of strengthening American nuclear strategy in the face of Soviet Union’s attainment of nuclear capability in 1949 which effectively ended America’s monopoly on atomic weapons.

Kissinger’s work, published in 1957, reflects the dominant geopolitical concerns of his time while attempting to amalgamate American military strategies and public policy and steer them towards curbing Soviet influence, particularly in the aftermath of the Berlin Wall fiasco, the Hungarian uprisings and the political stalemate it was forced to settle for during the Korean war – all the while attempting to portray its stature as a world leader. Kissinger’s commentary on the nuclear dilemma reflects the realist stream of thought – in its endeavor to sustain the liberal mantra of ‘peace before everything else’, America, he believes, has fallen prey to unnecessary appeasement of Soviet military intransigence fueled by complimentary dialogues of ‘peaceful coexistence’ initiated by the Kremlin at strategic moments in time. The obsession with technical prowess combined with an outdated mode of conducting all-out wars, he

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believes, has caused stagnation in America's strategic doctrine. Put simply, America possessed brilliant nuclear striking capacity, but fear of all-out catastrophe meant that its nuclear stockpile was left to decay in the arms of rapidly-fading American military supremacy.

Kissinger's response – pursuing a strategy of limited warfare in contrast to an all-out pursuit of rendering the enemy defenseless. With an aim of influencing the enemy's course of action, Kissinger prescribes limited nuclear warfare while acknowledging the reality that absolute security remains an elusive concept. Where his work finds contemporary resonance is in his expansion of the concept of security itself – transcending mere military concerns to one of psychological stability. His work remains heavily focused on dodging American passiveness during the Korean War, the Suez Crisis and the Indo-China War, which he describes as a 'psychological succumbing' to Soviet forces led by fears of mass retaliation. He attaches a political angle to warfare, associating force with the obtainment of specific objectives and requiring a 'spectrum of capabilities' to initiate the first attack in order to psychologically neutralize the enemy through mutual recognition of deterrence.

While his work remains a masterpiece in defining American military strategy as it stands today and continues to hold significant relevance, it reflects a megalomaniac tendency of appealing to American (and global) sentiments in 'resisting' Soviet influence, casting the USSR in the familiar 'big, bad wolf' antagonist role at a time when industrial prowess between the two nations continued to be heavily in favor of the United States of America. In fact, he dedicates a chapter to deliberating upon the necessity of regional collective security partnerships as means of successfully conducting limited warfare even as the theatre of warfare shifts from Europe to other parts of the globe. In doing so, he decries 'uncommitted' (erstwhile newly-decolonized third world nations) countries for falling to the allure of Soviet communism while outrightly rejecting stances of neutrality as baseless, effectively offering a Eurocentric perspective of herding powerless states into military camps in self-serving attitudes.

It would be misplaced, however, to ignore the timeless academic allure of the book, especially as the world threatens to split into two camps again in the midst of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. American interest in the war, as the largest military aids supplier to Ukraine, can be viewed as a pursuance of its strategic objectives of expanding NATO influence through the platform of limited warfare. In light of this, it becomes imperative to go back to Kissinger's words – namely the role of diplomacy in "relating disarmament to strategy", rather than advocating for complete eradication of nuclear weapons, as a way of "bridging the gap between force and diplomacy". His proposals of making diplomatic overtures to 'uncommitted' nations by expanding purely military alliances into arenas of diplomatic cooperation is a widely pursued diplomacy tactic as evidenced by the USA's increasing affiliation with the Indo-Pacific belt in recent years on grounds of economic development. Most pertinently, Kissinger's proclamation of the United Nations as holding no legalistic will of its own other than that of its collective member body deserves recognition, particularly at a time when the UN body comes under scrutiny for its perceived inability to affect meaningful change towards global peace.

When Michael Parker raised the question “Are you ready for nuclear Armageddon?” in his book ‘The Devil’s Trinity’, it reflected broader global sentiments – the question was no longer ‘if’ nuclear warfare would occur, but ‘when’. Kissinger’s work, a comprehensive manuscript meant for advanced academic readers, makes for a classic addition to the existing body of literature advocating deterrence, but in ways which advance American national interest by initiating first attacks in a limited warfare setting using ‘ineffective’ high-yield weapons, thereby raising the costs of thermonuclear retaliation by the enemy and avoiding the need for all-out war. Readers of the book would find it as no surprise that Kissinger pioneered the policy of détente with the Soviet Union and as to why his works continue holding immense prominence in shaping American security strategy at large.