

Weberian World Government in the Nuclear Age

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What is a world government for? James Yunker argues that a limited world government, one without supreme military authority, can achieve several notable goals, most important of which is a reduction of the extreme (and growing) economic inequality obtaining in our present world order. For Luis Cabrera, its primary purpose is to ensure basic human rights on a global scale, something clearly beyond the capability of international organisations in our current interstate system. The kind of government that could do this, Cabrera argues, does not require a supreme global military authority either.

This essay does not wish to contend that these objectives are unimportant, or that the world government which I characterise below would, or should, not seek to achieve them.

Rather, it is to make the more basic political theoretical point that it cannot achieve them, or much of anything else, unless it controls all war-making weaponry. What follows is not a full-blown blueprint for such a government, but rather a series of points which mean to substantiate this claim and briefly propose an alternative.

Max Weber argued, roughly a century ago, that a state must take possession of all war-making weaponry within its borders if it is to acquire political legitimacy. Weber insisted on the military dimension of state legitimacy not because he fetishised power as such, but because without such control the state would be unable to conduct politics effectively. If a government does not possess a monopoly over war-making weapons, then, by definition, other groups in the national society also have access to them. That means that the government will be unable to enact policies that antagonise such groups without running the risk of civil war. Such a government would lose political legitimacy and effectiveness and eventually preside over a failed state, as can be vividly seen in many countries today in which the possession of war-making weaponry is not monopolised.

Securing a monopoly over violence is a necessary task for any government. The primary claim of this essay, however, is that the unique qualities of the nuclear revolution make it even more important to a prospective world government than it is to a traditional nation-state.

A world government that permitted nations to retain sovereign nuclear weapons systems would make today's failed states look Scandinavian in comparison. A 'state' within a limited world government regime that possessed nuclear weaponry could easily reject any demand made by that government, putting the latter in the position of either losing its authority or threatening nuclear war. North Korea today, with perhaps one or two bombs and a dysfunctional government, is able to thumb its nose at the United States and an array of international institutions; what would a 'rogue' nuclear state with hundreds of invulnerable missiles be able to do against a world government? Furthermore, because even a handful of nuclear weapons are both easy to hide and strategically decisive (again, see North Korea), a world government could not permit sub-national groups of any kind to have access to nuclear technologies and facilities that would give them any chance to build a bomb on the sly. This would necessitate a permanent, invasive global regime of inspection and verification – as the architects of atomic control in 1945 and 1946, when only one nation possessed the bomb, recognised all too well.

These acute problems raised by nuclear anarchy pose insurmountable obstacles to the limited kind of world government proposed by Yunker and Cabrera. Quite simply, a world government that coexisted with sovereign nation states in continuing possession of substantial nuclear arsenals could not compel them to do anything, much less transfer a large part of their wealth to poorer nations or comply with a rigorous human rights regime. A crisis would eventually emerge pitting the world government against a recalcitrant 'rogue' state like, say, the US (unwilling to transfer wealth) or China (unwilling to agree to human rights demands). Either the world government would have nuclear weapons itself, thus leading to a nuclear showdown, possible war, or at least a collapse back into an anarchical system of power politics; or it would not have them, meaning certain retreat and the total loss of legitimacy. There is just no way around this problem.

The point is especially important because the failure of a limited world government would almost certainly be worse than never having built a world government at all. The establishment of a world government along the lines suggested by Yunker or Cabrera would constitute an immense political undertaking, requiring decades of extraordinary effort and the creation of a massive global bureaucracy. If such a regime failed to achieve its basic objectives, backing down in the face of nuclear threats issued by recalcitrant states, global convulsion would be the result, at best, and the cause of a serious world government would probably be doomed for centuries. As E. H. Carr argued several decades ago, ameliorative solutions to revolutionary problems can be worse than doing nothing.

In the nuclear age, the first task of an effective world government must be to acquire enough power to take possession of all nuclear weapons and prevent any group from building one surreptitiously. If it does not do so, it will fail. That means the creation of an authoritative, centralised state, at least in the realm of arms control (many other policies, I hasten to add, could, and should, be substantially devolved). I take no pleasure in the fact that a world government must acquire this kind of formal power. And I am perfectly well aware that arguments of this sort serve only to heighten fears of global tyranny and, consequently, intensify opposition to such a government in the first place. But it is better to confront these realities squarely rather than advocate a milder option that cannot succeed.

If a Weberian world government is the only answer in a world in which nuclear technology cannot be uninvented, what would persuade major states, those in possession of large nuclear arsenals and content with their national sovereignty, to sign up to it? This is the most important practical question facing the supporters of such a government, and here I want to turn to the essay by Alexander Wendt, who would, I believe, basically concur with my foregoing argument.

Wendt's excellent piece elaborates upon his ground-breaking 2003 article, 'Why a World State is Inevitable,' one of the inaugural works in the resurgence of thinking about world government in IR. In the new essay he makes more explicit (though it is evident in the original article) his normative case for a world government, and deals directly with objections to such a government on both practical and moral grounds.

I agree with most of his points, and would point readers particularly to his irrefutable argument about how liberal democratic ideals are ultimately irreconcilable with the existing interstate system. But here I will address one aspect of his essay which I think is off the mark.

A nascent world government, Wendt points out, would have no usable means to compel a nation like the US to subordinate itself to its rule. Therefore, Americans would have to be persuaded to join, even though, in most respects, they already enjoy the benefits that such a government would purport to provide globally. This problem, in my opinion, constitutes the single greatest obstacle to the formation of a viable world government. What is Wendt's solution?

In his 2003 article and the present essay, he stresses the notion of 'recognition,' the feeling of collective autonomy and respect for which peoples and societies naturally strive. The quest for recognition has been a cause of political conflict and war (witness Russian foreign policy today) just as much as material factors like security and wealth, he argues: a world state, he goes on, actually provides weaker societies with their best hope to retain it, as such a state could protect local cultures and political traditions otherwise doomed to be crushed by the pressures of neoliberal globalisation.

Why would America care about that? Here is Wendt's answer, at some length:

For it is not only the slave who seeks recognition from the master, but also the master who seeks recognition from the slave. And while in the short run the master can compel the slave to recognize him with the threat of violence or even death, in the long run this is not very satisfying. Coerced recognition is not really recognition at all, but only a pale psychologically unsatisfying substitute. So if Americans really want to be recognized by others, that recognition has to be freely given, not compelled, and that only is going to happen if we choose to make ourselves vulnerable by joining a world state. ('Why a World State is Democratically Necessary,' p. 13)

I do not find this convincing. For the US (or any putative superpower) to join a world state, if my above argument is accepted, it will have to relinquish its military power and subordinate itself to a political entity that is not controlled by the US. Even if we agree with Wendt that the process of world state-formation will be evolutionary and gradual, I doubt whether our hypothetical superpower will take such a fateful step, when it is perfectly able to continue on as a secure and powerful nation, for his idealistic reasons. Actually, I think the more likely scenario, at this

future moment of decision, would be an American agreement to join this world state only if it were absolutely sure that it could dominate it. That move, after all, would permit the US to have its recognition cake and eat it too. It should be recalled that it was this kind of proposal that the Truman administration put forward in the aftermath of the Second World War, at a time when American power was less globalised and faced a serious competitor in the USSR. That deal was rejected by the Soviet Union, and would presumably be rejected in our future scenario, because the result would not be a world government but a Pax Americana.

If a predominantly powerful and secure state like the US would not be persuaded to submit itself to the rule of a world state for idealistic reasons, what could do the trick? Here I return to the existential threat posed by nuclear war.

The possibility of nuclear omnicide (i.e. the effective destruction of human civilisation by a nuclear war) poses unique problems, for three reasons we have never really confronted before. First, and most obvious, it can wipe out the human race, and, as such, constitutes a morally absolute disaster. Most ethical assertions can be challenged, but not this one: nobody tries to argue that a total nuclear war might be OK. Second, an omnicidal war could occur without being the fault of any one single nation, nor can it be prevented reliably by any one single nation. Therefore, any serious solution to it can only be attained by concerted international cooperation, something very difficult to achieve in an anarchical interstate system.

Third, and most important for our purposes, the existential nature of the nuclear threat means that we cannot learn from failure. In the past, peoples established new and larger forms of government in the aftermath of man-made disasters that smaller or inadequate states could not protect them from. After the deluge, the covenant. The problem now is that there will be nobody left to establish a world government after a general nuclear war. This means that the threat must be pre-empted: it must be eliminated before it strikes.

These three factors, taken together, present to the US or any other hypothetical superpower an inescapable security threat that it cannot defeat by itself. No single nation, no matter how powerful, can eliminate the threat of nuclear war by its own efforts; by the same token, no nation can protect itself from its catastrophic effects no matter how blameless it may be for them. Thus the US could be destroyed by a nuclear war that begins between, say, India and China and escalates out of control: the fact that Americans might have had nothing to do with the outbreak of the war would mean little to its few survivors.

The 'fear of nuclear death,' writes David Gauthier, 'provides the common interest which alone can provide nations with a basis for common action.' The dilemma, as we have noted, is that the common action necessary to eliminate nuclear fear must aim at the establishment of an authoritative, centralised world state. The unique problems raised by the prospect of nuclear war, ironically, give us both the most powerful argument for world government and the best reason to dismiss it as a dangerous fantasy.

It is crucial that this dilemma is confronted head on rather than evaded. This is so especially because the common-sense claim that a Weberian world government is impossible is actually a lazy and unsustainable argument. As Wendt points out, it ignores the clear historical reality that

the number of states on the planet has been steadily diminishing since prehistoric times; by what logic can one simply assert that this linear process is predetermined to stop at some number before one? It ignores the fact that political developments once regarded as totally absurd are now unremarkable: an observer predicting, around, say, 1940 that a European Union would come into existence within a half-century, one founded on a French/German alliance, with uncontrolled borders and a common currency, would have been ridiculed as ruthlessly as proponents of world government are today.

One might add to this the possibility of catastrophic climate change. I believe that nuclear war poses a more tangible and definitively existential threat to human survival than environmental disaster, and that its solution demands a different sort of political action. However, the acute collective action problem which bedevils international climate change politics also cannot be solved without supranational government. And in any event, a world state that arose to eliminate the threat of nuclear war could also deal with climate change.

Most important of all, those who assert that a world government is impossible have no answer to the nuclear dilemma: the coexistence of arsenals and anarchy. To insist that international anarchy will last into eternity amounts, barring some technological revolution, to an acceptance that a nuclear war will some day occur. The 'problem with deterrence,' wrote Martin Amis, 'is that it can't last out the necessary timespan, which is roughly between now and the death of the sun.' One can shrug one's shoulders and say that's just a tragic fact of power politics about which nothing can be done, but no IR scholar actually buys that.

The idea that world government is impossible is, as Wendt would put it, simply an idea. Ideas can change, and what is regarded as wildly unrealistic today can become a mainstream argument tomorrow. That means that those of us who believe that a world government is necessary if the human race is to survive and prosper need to stick to our guns.