



Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker receiving the “Lion of Tutzing Award” from Friedemann Greiner, Director of the Protestant Academy in Tutzing, near Munich, Bavaria, Germany in 2002 on the occasion of his 90th birthday. *Source* U. Bartosch

Chapter 2

Overcoming the Institution of War

2.1 War and Peace

The theme ‘war and peace’ does not quite correspond exactly structurally to the motto ‘might and humanity.’¹ Peace is, indeed, a cue word for humanitarianism; political peace is the more worthy political state for human beings. On the other hand, war is not the most important phenomenon of might even in foreign policy, but at best the most dramatic one. Might accumulates the means for potential public purposes. Then military power is the capability to wage war; nevertheless it attains its purpose best by pushing through its political goals without war, by its mere threatening presence. A real outbreak of war almost always proves to be a failure of politics for one of the two sides, often for both sides.

The considerations in the Second Chapter [on ‘Future and Origin,’ in *Bewußtseinswandel*, literally, Transformed Consciousness: *Bw*] about the problem of war and peace constantly reverted back to the two theses:

2.2 World War III is Probable. It is Necessary and Possible to Eliminate the Institution of War

These two theses are logically not strictly associated with each other. The major powers have managed to avoid World War III up to now. Some people attach to this the sanguine hope that *nuclear* war never will take place. But war as an institution has not yet been overcome; rather, it is silently presumed to be insuperable. An

¹ This text was published in: Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker: *Bewusstseinswandel* [Transformed Consciousness] (München/Wien: Hanser, 1988): 461–468. It was translated for this volume by Ms. Ann Hentschel with the financial support of the Udo Keller Foundation.

astute Swiss officer said to me soon after Hiroshima: 'Now comes a period of limited wars, limited in their goals and means.' He has been proven right until now. Pragmatic policy nowadays regards it as sufficient for the survival of humanity at its present cultivation and scale, to maintain this state of limited warfare. We shall first look at the conditions for the continuance of this state, then at the more far-reaching demand to overcome war as an institution.

2.2.1 *The Age of Limited Warfare*

Statistical studies exist on the kinds and numbers of wars over the course of history.² According to these studies the period since 1945 appears to meet the normal average. For almost one hundred years, between 1815 and 1914, the major powers of the day have fought only a few wars against one another, all of which pursued limited goals. There has been no direct war between the remaining major powers from 1945 to 1987; one could perhaps mention as an exception the brief clash between American and Chinese troops in Korea from 1950 to '53. An accounting of all wars within the pertinent time intervals is not possible without a certain amount of arbitrariness; it was always with some reservations that I quoted the figure of about 130 wars for the period since 1945 in the essays of the Second Chapter [Bw]. According to these reckonings, the number of wars in the 20th century is substantially higher than during the 19th century. The number of states counting as sovereign rose at the same time, though, from 23 around 1820 to over 160 today. Consequently, on average, the number of wars in which a state was implicated fell substantially at the same time. Ultimately, the reader of this kind of study will deem it necessary to choose his own evaluation criteria for such statistical figures. A couple of general assertions can be posited nonetheless.

The low number and magnitudes of direct wars between the major powers between 1815 and 1914 could well be connected to the colonial expansion period of the European powers. Their military superiority over the rest of the world made them capable of this expansion. One could probably say that the World War of 1914 began 'when the powers discovered that the Earth is round,' that is, when expansion no longer provided for the powers an outlet from internal tensions of the system. Predictions of war by poets, Marxists, and anxious statesmen did exist; it was 'up in the air' shortly before 1914 whether peace between the world leaders could be preserved.

The time after 1945 brought an end to direct political colonial rule (with the exception of the Russian empire, which is continental and thus eludes the designation 'colonial'). Economic expansion permitted the powers to continue to exert their influence, as they anyway remained militarily superior. One ought to be able to

² E.g., M. Small and J.D. Singer: *Resort to Arms* (Beverly Hills, Ca.: Sage, 1982); cited after K.J. Holsti: *Paths to Peace? Theories of Conflict Resolution and the Realities of International Politics*, speech, University of Otago, New Zealand 1987.

say, though, that during this period the avoidance of nuclear confrontation set the gauge for limited warfare. Only those wars seemingly certain not to turn nuclear were really waged. The majority of these wars had regional causes. As long as it lasted, political colonial rule prevented the settlement of regional conflicts in the form of war in many cases. Thus the rise in the number of wars in conjunction with the total number of sovereign nations is not surprising.

The question is whether this state in global policy can be upheld over the long term. Merely counting and describing the wars raises a presumably inaccurate impression of stability in this situation. The series of 'stages' and 'crises' constantly recurring throughout history (...) warns us to be cautious. The settlement of conflicts by limited warfare is a stabilization pattern of a particular historical stage. The origin of an approaching crisis is external to a stage's stabilization pattern. We have looked at such processes advancing toward instability in the areas of ecology and social economy.

Our cultural consciousness has not moved away from the expectation of crises, dating back to before 1914. Since the period around 1900, and undiminished after 1945, living art has been representing the uncanny, wild, and broken foundations of culture; any hope it detects is hope for change.

The superpowers' need for security is the basis of stability in the power politics of the current stage. In the Second Chapter [Bw], I explained why I cannot consider the current organizational form of its security reliable yet. From the standpoint of the era of limited warfare, it has to be added here that the present system of nuclear deterrence, for instance, the NATO doctrine of flexible response, is essentially built upon the threat of *limited* nuclear deployment. The threat to deploy the largest ('strategic') weapons can only deter the opponent involved from deploying its own strategic weapons. If this mutual deterrence is reliable, an even larger nuclear threat cannot deter limited aggression because then it has lost its credibility. Within the framework of the deterrence doctrine, it therefore seems essential to deter limited deployment by a likewise limited threat. One thorough analyst³ reaches the conclusion that if a nuclear war did come to a head, with a probability of 5–1 the nuclear deployment would remain limited.

It is evident that such an analysis cannot be consoling. The traffic authorities would never issue a permit to a new automobile model that although relatively safe, warranted only that in case of an accident, in five out of six cases the passengers alone would be hurt and in one out of six cases the whole city would be engulfed in flames.

In fact, the threat of limited *nuclear* deployment is not an immanent military necessity. Modern high-precision weaponry permits a 'defensive defense' with 'structural nonaggression capability.'⁴ The objection that any weapon could be used offensively just as well as defensively can only be raised in ignorance of the

³ G. Blainey: *The Causes of War* (London: Macmillan, 1973, rev. ed. 1988); cited after his contribution *Past and Future Wars* (Otago, NZ: University of Otago, 1987).

⁴ H. Afheldt: *Defensive Verteidigung* (Reinbek near Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1983); H. Afheldt: *Atomkrieg. Das Verhängnis einer Politik mit militärischen Mitteln* (München: Hanser, 1984).

structure of this plan. A single weapon, let's say, *one* missile can be used offensively as well as defensively, depending on the *weapons system* in which it is incorporated. An entire weapons system, for example, ground-based anti-tank missiles with no means of transport available for attacking purposes could only be made offensively deployable by a major rearmament effort. Such a defensive system provides no stimulus for a new arms race. It would be one step along the way toward stabilization by reduction of the reciprocal threat.

A 'defensive defense' would therefore be a contribution toward the creation of more stable *structures*. It would make a specific part of nuclear deterrence objectively superfluous, namely, the threat of limited deployment. This goes further than the plans about direct nuclear disarmament, under much more emotional public debate. Public awareness changed about the assessment of nuclear deterrence roughly at the beginning of the 1980s. Prior to that one felt quite safe under the shield of this deterrence. Now its dismantling is deemed better security. But even the dismantling of middle-range ballistic missiles gives rise to anxiety. In France I heard the contention that this was the plot against Europe's freedom finally being put into action by the Americans and Russians; this freedom could only be guaranteed by Europe's own nuclear weaponry (...). Indeed, de Gaulle's 466 strike force was also a *structurally* carefully planned system. The lack of a structural alternative highly understandably allows fears to develop (...).

It goes without saying that these fears should not be allowed to hamper the progress of the dialogue between the major powers which has finally started. This dialogue ought to lead, in the interest of both parties, toward securing the temporary risky *technical* measures for the prevention of war by a new *political* structure of peace. On the way there, however, intermediary technical structures are certainly indispensable. That is why special attention must be directed at those structures.

One misguided structural alternative is the space defense project (S[trategic] D[efense] I[nitiative]). In introducing this project in 1983, President Reagan expressed a truth that was probably known in principle to every one of his predecessors in office since 1945: namely, that the nuclear threat is morally problematic and functionally not fully reliable. He hoped, presumably sincerely, that his new project would make atomic weapons '*impotent and obsolete*' over the long term. Since then, every expert knows that total security cannot be achieved with this project and that it is presumably very much better suited for offensive uses than for defense.

The wish for military superiority is evidently behind this project, perhaps also an earnest fear of military superiority by the other side. This wish is very well compatible with a sincere desire for peace. Military superiority by one party is often a better guarantee for the prevention of war than precarious military equilibrium, with its constant temptation to venture some violation. One could imagine the dream path from secured military superiority by one's own side toward a permanent world state, a realm of peace.

It is necessary to say goodbye to such dreams. They will not materialize in the foreseeable future. Psychologically they generate precisely those counter-reactions making conflict inevitable. The real interests of the West are best assured in a world

in which the economic superiority of the Western system can be brought to bear. And an essential transformation of awareness is not promoted by such dreams; it is rather impeded.

2.2.2 *Overcoming the Institution of War*

After this close description of a threatened but not hopeless situation of the world, what good is such a disproportionate demand to overcome the institution of war? Does this demand have any prospect of being realized? Isn't there a more modest way of going about it?

The emphasis here is on the word *institution*. An institution is a social structure consciously instituted by people, i.e., established and recognized. It is made by human beings and, in principle, can be eliminated by human beings. War is an institution recognized by international law. Formally, it ought to be possible to retract its legitimacy by international agreement. This idea has long been known to our century. It is among the fundamental aims of the League of Nations in 1920 and the United Nations in 1945. But where does the power come from for pushing this idea through?

Those who thought about this have frequently conjured up the model of a world state. One comparable process seems to be the supplanting of medieval feuding rights by the sovereign territorial state. We have already regarded the necessity for world-wide regulations in the subsections on economy and ecology; also the demand to make them concur with largely decentralized resolutions. But a prince of the late Middle Ages or early modern times had enough military might to impose his own public peace. The American lawyers Clark and Sohn drew up a model in the early 1960s in which the United Nations had a monopoly on weapons at the end of an international disarmament process.⁵ This idealistic plan was obviously impracticable.

We are forced to recognize today that the institution of war *isn't* abolished. However, it seems to me, we are also forced to recognize that its abolishment is a necessary precondition for the perpetuation of a viable humanity. It depends on the sound rationality of too many people for us to be able to base our political calculation on the conclusion that the period of limited warfare will not lead to an outsized war. (...) Commonly shared political rationality requires a transformation of consciousness by individual persons; this transformed consciousness needs to be anchored in the objective contents of culture, in institutions. It is now a matter of making this realization become a component of public awareness. The moment that humankind really wants it, the institution of war will be superable. 'Humankind' here means not each individual person, but the bearers and shapers of public awareness.

⁵ G. Clark and L. Sohn: *World Peace through World Law* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 3rd ed., 1966); in German: *Frieden durch ein neues Weltrecht* (Frankfurt/Main: Alfred Metzner-Verlag, 1961).

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