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Realizing The Dream! – Give us a student, we give back a Bureaucrat
WAR

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Never underestimate human stupidity

The last few decades have been the most peaceful era in human history. Whereas in early agricultural societies human violence caused up to 15 per cent of all human deaths, and in the twentieth century it caused 5 per cent, today it is responsible for only 1 per cent.¹ Yet since the global financial crisis of 2008 the international situation is rapidly deteriorating, warmongering is back in vogue, and military expenditure is ballooning.² Both laypeople and experts fear that just as in 1914 the murder of an Austrian archduke sparked the First World War, so in 2018 some incident in the Syrian desert or an unwise move in the Korean peninsula might ignite a global conflict.

Given the growing tensions in the world, and the personalities of leaders in Washington, Pyongyang and several other places, there is definitely cause for concern. Yet there are several key differences between 2018 and 1914. In particular, in 1914 war had great appeal to elites across the world because they had many concrete examples of how successful wars contributed to economic prosperity and political power. In contrast, in 2018 successful wars seem to be an endangered species.

From the days of the Assyrians and the Qin, great empires were usually built through violent conquest. In 1914 too, all the major powers owed their status to successful wars. For instance, Imperial Japan became a regional power thanks to its victories over China and Russia; Germany became Europe's top dog after its triumphs over Austria-Hungary and France; and Britain created the world's largest and most prosperous empire through a series of splendid little wars all over the planet. Thus in 1882 Britain invaded and occupied Egypt, losing a mere fifty-seven soldiers in the decisive Battle of Tel el-Kebir.³ Whereas in our days occupying a Muslim country is the stuff of Western nightmares, following Tel elKebir the British faced little armed resistance, and for more than six decades controlled the Nile Valley and the vital Suez Canal. Other European powers emulated the British, and whenever governments in Paris, Rome or Brussels contemplated putting boots on the ground in Vietnam, Libya or Congo, their only fear was that somebody else might get there first.

Even the United States owed its great-power status to military action rather than economic enterprise alone. In 1846 it invaded Mexico, and conquered California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico and parts of Colorado, Kansas, Wyoming and Oklahoma. The peace treaty also confirmed the previous US annexation of Texas. About 13,000 American soldiers died in the war, which added 2.3 million square kilometers to the United States (more than the combined size of France, Britain, Germany, Spain and Italy).⁴ It was the bargain of the millennium.

In 1914 the elites in Washington, London and Berlin knew exactly what a successful war looked like, and how much could be gained from it. In contrast, in 2018 global elites have good reason to suspect that this type of war might have become extinct. Though some Third World dictators and non-state actors still manage to flourish through war, it seems that major powers no longer know how to do so.

The greatest victory in living memory – of the United States over the Soviet Union – was achieved without any major military confrontation. The United States then got a fleeting taste of old-fashioned military glory in the First Gulf War, but this only tempted it to waste trillions on humiliating military fiascos in Iraq and Afghanistan. China, the rising power of the early twenty-

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first century, has assiduously avoided all armed conflicts since its failed invasion of Vietnam in 1979, and it owes its ascent strictly to economic factors. In this it has emulated not the Japanese, German and Italian empires of the pre-1914 era, but rather the Japanese, German and Italian economic miracles of the post-1945 era. In all these cases economic prosperity and geopolitical clout were achieved without firing a shot.

Even in the Middle East – the fighting ring of the world – regional powers don't know how to wage successful wars. Iran gained nothing from the long bloodbath of the Iran–Iraq War, and subsequently avoided all direct military confrontations. The Iranians finance and arm local movements from Iraq to Yemen, and have sent their Revolutionary Guards to help their allies in Syria and Lebanon, but so far they have been careful not to invade any country. Iran has recently become the regional hegemon not by dint of any brilliant battlefield victory, but rather by default. Its two main enemies – the USA and Iraq – got embroiled in a war that destroyed both Iraq and the American appetite for Middle Eastern quagmires, thereby leaving Iran to enjoy the spoils. Much the same can be said of Israel. Its last successful war was waged in 1967. Since then Israel prospered despite its many wars, not thanks to them.

Most of its occupied territories saddle it with heavy economic burdens and crippling political liabilities. Much like Iran, Israel has lately improved its geopolitical position not by waging successful wars, but by avoiding military adventures. While war has ravaged Israel's erstwhile enemies in Iraq, Syria and Libya, Israel has remained aloof. Not getting sucked into the Syrian civil war has arguably been Netanyahu's greatest political achievement (as of March 2018). If it wanted to, the Israel Defense Forces could have seized Damascus within a week, but what would Israel have gained from that? It would be even easier for the IDF to conquer Gaza and topple the Hamas regime, but Israel has repeatedly declined to do so. For all its military prowess and for all the hawkish rhetoric of Israeli politicians, Israel knows there is little to be won from war. Like the USA, China, Germany, Japan and Iran, Israel seems to understand that in the twenty first century the most successful strategy is to sit on the fence and let others do the fighting for you.

The view from the Kremlin

So far the only successful invasion mounted by a major power in the twenty-first century has been the Russian conquest of Crimea. In February 2014 Russian forces invaded neighboring Ukraine and occupied the Crimean peninsula, which was subsequently annexed to Russia. With hardly any fighting, Russia gained strategically vital territory, struck fear into its neighbours, and reestablished itself as a world power. However, the conquest succeeded thanks to an extraordinary set of circumstances. Neither the Ukrainian army nor the local population showed much resistance to the Russians, while other powers refrained from directly intervening in the crisis. These circumstances will be hard to reproduce elsewhere around the world. If the precondition for a successful war is the absence of enemies willing to resist the aggressor, it seriously limits the available opportunities.

Indeed, when Russia sought to reproduce its Crimean success in other parts of Ukraine, it encountered substantially stiffer opposition, and the war in eastern Ukraine bogged down into unproductive stalemate. Even worse (from Moscow's perspective), the war has stoked anti-Russian feelings in Ukraine and turned that country from an ally into a sworn enemy. Just as success in the First Gulf War tempted the USA to overreach itself in Iraq, success in Crimea may have tempted Russia to overreach itself in Ukraine.

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Taken together, Russia's wars in the Caucasus and Ukraine in the early twenty-first century can hardly be described as very successful. Though they have boosted Russia's prestige as a great power, they have also increased distrust and animosity towards Russia, and in economic terms they have been a losing enterprise. Tourist resorts in Crimea and decrepit Soviet-era factories in Luhansk and Donetsk hardly balance the price of financing the war, and they certainly do not offset the costs of capital flight and international sanctions. To realise the limitations of the Russian policy, one just needs to compare the immense economic progress of peaceful China in the last twenty years to the economic stagnation of 'victorious' Russia during the same period.⁵

The brave talk from Moscow notwithstanding, the Russian elite itself is probably well aware of the real costs and benefits of its military adventures, which is why it has so far been very careful not to escalate them. Russia has been following the playground-bully principle: 'pick on the weakest kid, and don't beat him up too much, lest the teacher intervenes'. If Putin had conducted his wars in the spirit of Stalin, Peter the Great or Genghis Khan, then Russian tanks would have long ago made a dash for Tbilisi and Kyiv, if not for Warsaw and Berlin. But Putin is neither Genghis nor Stalin. He seems to know better than anyone else that military power cannot go far in the twenty-first century, and that waging a successful war means waging a limited war. Even in Syria, despite the ruthlessness of Russian aerial bombardments, Putin has been careful to minimise the Russian footprint, to let others do all the serious fighting, and to prevent the war from spilling over into neighboring countries.

Indeed, from Russia's perspective, all its supposedly aggressive moves in recent years were not the opening gambits of a new global war, but rather an attempt to shore up exposed defences. Russians can justifiably point out that after their peaceful retreats in the late 1980s and early 1990s they were treated like a defeated enemy. The USA and NATO took advantage of Russian weakness, and despite promises to the contrary, expanded NATO to Eastern Europe and even to some former Soviet republics. The West went on to ignore Russian interests in the Middle East, invaded Serbia and Iraq on doubtful pretexts, and generally made it very clear to Russia that it can count only on its own military power to protect its sphere of influence from Western incursions. From this perspective, recent Russian military moves can be blamed on Bill Clinton and George W. Bush as much as on Vladimir Putin.

Of course, Russian military actions in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria may yet turn out to be the opening salvoes of a far bolder imperial drive. Even if so far Putin has not harbored serious plans for global conquests, success might fan his ambitions. However, it would also be well to remember that Putin's Russia is far weaker than Stalin's USSR, and unless it is joined by other countries such as China, it cannot support a new Cold War, let alone a full-blown world war. Russia has a population of 150 million people and a GDP of \$4 trillion. In both population and production it is dwarfed by the USA (325 million people and \$19 trillion) and the European Union (500 million people and \$21 trillion).⁶ Together, the USA and EU have five times more people than Russia, and ten times more dollars.

Recent technological developments have made this gap even bigger than it seems. The USSR reached its zenith in the mid twentieth century, when heavy industry was the locomotive of the global economy, and the Soviet centralised system excelled in the mass production of tractors, trucks, tanks and intercontinental missiles. Today, information technology and biotechnology are more important than heavy industry, but Russia excels in neither. Though it has impressive

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cyber warfare capabilities, it lacks a civilian IT sector, and its economy relies overwhelmingly on natural resources, particularly oil and gas. This may be good enough to enrich a few oligarchs and keep Putin in power, but it is not enough to win a digital or biotechnological arms race.

Even more importantly, Putin's Russia lacks a universal ideology. During the Cold War the USSR relied on the global appeal of communism as much as on the global reach of the Red Army. Putinism, in contrast, has little to offer Cubans, Vietnamese or French intellectuals. Authoritarian nationalism may indeed be spreading in the world, but by its very nature it is not conducive to the establishment of cohesive international blocs. Whereas Polish communism and Russian communism were both committed, at least in theory, to the universal interests of an international working class, Polish nationalism and Russian nationalism are by definition committed to opposing interests. As Putin's rise sparks an upsurge of Polish nationalism, this will only make Poland more anti Russian than before.

Though Russia has embarked on a global campaign of disinformation and subversion that aims to break up NATO and the EU, it does not seem likely that it is about to embark on a global campaign of physical conquest. One can hope – with some justification – that the takeover of Crimea and the Russian incursions in Georgia and eastern Ukraine will remain isolated examples rather than harbingers of a new era of war.

The lost art of winning wars

Why is it so difficult for major powers to wage successful wars in the twenty-first century? One reason is the change in the nature of the economy. In the past, economic assets were mostly material, so it was relatively straightforward to enrich yourself by conquest. If you defeated your enemies on the battlefield, you could cash in by looting their cities, selling their civilians in the slave markets, and occupying valuable wheat fields and gold mines. Romans prospered by selling captive Greeks and Gauls, and nineteenth-century Americans thrived by occupying the gold mines of California and the cattle ranches of Texas.

Yet in the twenty-first century only puny profits can be made that way. Today the main economic assets consist of technical and institutional knowledge rather than wheat fields, gold mines or even oil fields, and you just cannot conquer knowledge through war. An organisation such as the Islamic State may still flourish by looting cities and oil wells in the Middle East – they seized more than \$500 million from Iraqi banks and in 2015 made an additional \$500 million from selling oil.

But for a major power such as China or the USA, these are trifling sums. With an annual GDP of more than \$20 trillion, China is unlikely to start a war for a paltry billion. As for spending trillions of dollars on a war against the USA, how could China repay these expenses and balances all the war damages and lost trade opportunities? Would the victorious People's Liberation Army loot the riches of Silicon Valley? True, corporations such as Apple, Facebook and Google are worth hundreds of billions of dollars, but you cannot seize these fortunes by force. There are no silicon mines in Silicon Valley.

A successful war could theoretically still bring huge profits by enabling the victor to rearrange the global trade system in its favour, as Britain did after its victory over Napoleon and as the USA did after its victory over Hitler. However, changes in military technology make it difficult to repeat this feat in the twenty-first century. The atom bomb has turned victory in a world war into collective suicide. It is no coincidence that ever since Hiroshima, superpowers never fought one

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another directly, and engaged only in what (for them) were low-stake conflicts, in which the temptation to use nuclear weapons to avert defeat was small. Indeed, even attacking a second-rate nuclear power such as North Korea is an extremely unattractive proposition. It is scary to think what the Kim family might do if it faces military defeat.

Cyberwarfare makes things even worse for would-be imperialists. In the good old days of Queen Victoria and the Maxim gun, the British army could massacre the fuzzy-wuzzies in some far-off desert without endangering the peace of Manchester and Birmingham. Even in the days of George W. Bush, the USA could wreak havoc in Baghdad and Fallujah while the Iraqis had no means of retaliating against San Francisco or Chicago. But if the USA now attacks a country possessing even moderate cyberwarfare capabilities, the war could be brought to California or Illinois within minutes. Malwares and logic bombs could stop air traffic in Dallas, cause trains to collide in Philadelphia, and bring down the electric grid in Michigan.

In the great age of conquerors warfare was a low-damage, high-profit affair. At the Battle of Hastings in 1066 William the Conqueror gained the whole of England in a single day for the cost of a few thousand dead. Nuclear weapons and cyber warfare, by contrast, are high-damage, low-profit technologies. You could use such tools to destroy entire countries, but not to build profitable empires.

In a world filling up with sabre-rattling and bad vibes, perhaps our best guarantee of peace is that major powers aren't familiar with recent examples of successful wars. While Genghis Khan or Julius Caesar would invade a foreign country at the drop of a hat, present-day nationalist leaders such as Erdogan, Modi and Netanyahu talk loud but are very careful about actually launching wars. Of course, if somebody does find a formula to wage successful wars under twenty-first-century conditions, the gates of hell might open with a rush. This is what makes the Russian success in Crimea a particularly frightening omen. Let's hope it remains an exception.

The march of folly

Alas, even if wars remain an unprofitable business in the twenty-first century, that would not give us an absolute guarantee of peace. We should never underestimate human stupidity. Both on the personal and on the collective level, humans are prone to engage in self-destructive activities.

In 1939 war was probably a counterproductive move for the Axis powers – Yet it did not save the world. One of the astounding things about the Second World War is that following the war the defeated powers prospered as never before. Twenty years after the complete annihilation of their armies and the utter collapse of their empires, Germans, Italians and Japanese were enjoying unprecedented levels of affluence. Why, then, did they go to war in the first place? Why did they inflict unnecessary death and destruction on countless millions? It was all just a stupid miscalculation. In the 1930s Japanese generals, admirals, economists and journalists concurred that without control of Korea, Manchuria and the Chinese coast, Japan was doomed to economic stagnation.⁸

They were all wrong. In fact, the famed Japanese economic miracle began only after Japan lost all its mainland conquests.

Human stupidity is one of the most important forces in history, yet we often discount it. Politicians, generals and scholars treat the world as a great chess game, where every move follows careful rational calculations. This is correct up to a point. Few leaders in history have been mad in the narrow sense of the word, moving pawns and knights at random. General Tojo,

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Saddam Hussein and Kim Jong-Il had rational reasons for every move they played. The problem is that the world is far more complicated than a chessboard, and human rationality is not up to the task of really understanding it. Hence even rational leaders frequently end up doing very stupid things.

So how much should we fear a world war? It is best to avoid two extremes. On the one hand, war is definitely not inevitable. The peaceful termination of the Cold War proves that when humans make the right decisions, even superpower conflicts can be resolved peacefully. Moreover, it is exceedingly dangerous to assume that a new world war is inevitable. That would be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Once countries assume that war is inevitable, they beef up their armies, embark on spiralling arms races, refuse to compromise in any conflict, and suspect that goodwill gestures are just traps. That guarantees the eruption of war.

On the other hand, it would be naïve to assume that war is impossible. Even if war is catastrophic for everyone, no god and no law of nature protects us from human stupidity. One potential remedy for human stupidity is a dose of humility. National, religious and cultural tensions are made worse by the grandiose feeling that my nation, my religion and my culture are the most important in the world – hence my interests should come before the interests of anyone else, or of humankind as a whole. How can we make nations, religions and cultures a bit more realistic and modest about their true place in the world?

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