

THE EUROPEAN TRAGEDY OF 1914 & THE MULTIPOLAR WORLD OF 2014

Vuk Jeremić

THIS year marks the centenary of the outbreak of World War I, which was no doubt one of the pivotal events of the modern era. Notwithstanding the vast transformations that we have undergone since, this great conflict remains what Winston Churchill called “a drama never surpassed.”

Our present circumstances are indeed intimately related to the past hundred years: a historical trajectory shaped by what happened between 1914 and 1918 in far-reaching, not always fully appreciated, ways.

Soon after the “great black tornado”—in Theodore Roosevelt’s memorable phrase—had run its destructive course across Europe, it became clear that the social forces unleashed by the carnage could not be contained for long within a reconstituted, yet inherently fragile, international order.

For a brief moment after the 1917 February Revolution in Russia, it might have been hoped that the anticipated victory of the powers of the Entente would result in a clear-cut victory for liberal democracy. But this illusion was soon shattered by the success of the Bolsheviks, and the barely contained social unrest in Weimar Germany.

The rise of Mussolini in 1922, the emergence of National Socialism in the late-1920s, and gradual shifts towards totalitarianism in many parts of the Old Continent by the mid-1930s, demonstrated that fascism was as much a beneficiary of World War I as the radical Left.

The Spanish Civil War was a potent symbol of this state of affairs. For the first time in modern European history, the Enlightenment values of liberal democracy played at best a secondary role in a major

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conflict. The essential contest turned out to be the one between the proponents of the zealous Left and the adherents of the totalitarian Right, following the relegation of the philosophies of the likes of Locke and Montesquieu to the intellectual wasteland by the brutality of the Great War.

This is a conclusion confirmed rather than qualified if we for a moment leave the world of politics and ideology, and consider the literature of high Modernism that came into its own in the years after World War I.

Radical ideas had manifestly much more appeal for the most significant writers of that period than the humane values embraced by many of the great nineteenth-century authors and their early twentieth-century followers. Yeats, Eliot and Pound in England, Benn and Jünger in Germany, Céline in France—to mention only some of the most important names—were attracted to the thoughts and moral outlook of the extreme Right. Similarly, writers such as Brecht in Germany, Mayakovsky in the Soviet Union, and the Surrealists in France and elsewhere, became more or less convinced followers of the anti-bourgeois Left—increasingly identified during the 1930s with Marxism.

Such writers never reverted to the liberal outlook of the pre-1914 world; theirs remained an altogether darker universe, open to violence in many of its forms.

The long shadow cast by the Great War engulfed all but the most sober of minds: Thomas Mann in Germany, Paul Valéry in France, Virginia Woolf in Britain. They became the isolated torchbearers of liberal continuity.

In many obvious ways, World War I set the stage for World War II, which was instigated by Hitler in part to overturn the Versailles settlement and achieve some of the same goals pursued a generation earlier.

It was the “calamity from which all other calamities sprang,” as one prominent German-American historian has written. Indeed, the appalling disregard for human life and the transgression of moral limits practiced with unimaginable ferocity during World War II seem to find their point of origin in World War I. It is no accident that Charles de Gaulle called it a “war of extermination,” condemning World War I as perhaps the most disastrous turning point in modern history.

All these horrors—it is sometimes claimed—might have been avoided if the Great Powers had not taken up arms in 1914.

Our grasp of counterfactual thinking on such a large scale is, in my view, too uncertain to pronounce with confidence. However, it does make sense to carefully examine the developments leading to the outbreak of the Great War in order to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.

The tensions and crises in regions far and wide—which are such a pronounced feature of the present day—are not so unlike those of the early twentieth-century multipolar world.

Then, as now, we had a constant interplay of domestic and international factors rendering the resolution of specific conflicts difficult and, when achieved, often extremely unstable.

Then, as now, the underlying intentions of the most important players were sometimes opaque to one another and to other actors, making for a lack of trust and insufficient commitment to achieving compromise solutions.

Then, as now, there was more than enough room for single-minded pursuits of particular goals, potentially serving as triggers for violent clashes on a much wider scale.

And then, just as now, vigorous attempts were made at manipulating public opinion to believe in the belligerence of others and the peaceful intentions of one's own side.

THREE CRITICAL THEATRES

Ukraine, of course, is the theatre where this is perhaps most clearly seen today. Less than a month before the Sochi Winter Olympic

Games began in early February, the World Economic Forum released its 2014 *Global Risks* report. The word “Ukraine” did not appear at all—an apt illustration of the fact that the crisis came about virtually without warning, chillingly reminiscent of the situation we had a century ago.

Everyone is today worse off than at the turn of the year, when irresponsible leadership placed Ukraine in the untenable position of having to choose between Russia and West—despite it being perfectly obvious that there can be no political and economic sustainability without the country being able to work closely with both.

Ukraine’s citizens now face a prolonged period of internal disruption. This will make it much more difficult to reach an agreement about the future, and to rebuild what has been destroyed. This will almost certainly have to be guaranteed and facilitated by both Russia and the West.

Virtually all key players have at least to some extent misperceived the motivations of others—whether because of the shadows cast by the past, flawed assessments of strategic intentions, or misunderstanding of geopolitical realities.

As a result of what appear to be in hindsight a series of avoidable errors, EU-Russia relations are deteriorating, with an increasingly negative impact on their respective economies.

Even the United States—which at first glance appears not to be terribly affected by the situation in Ukraine—is likely to face some unwelcome consequences once the wider international picture is taken into account.

With even the residual trust between the U.S. and Russia disappearing—and being replaced by mutual suspicion and reciprocal feelings of contempt—cooperation on many issues in the UN Security Council could prove to be much harder.

In recent times, Washington and Moscow had worked together on at least two important Middle Eastern issues: the conflict in Syria and the Iranian nuclear program.

Limited progress on both fronts had been achieved, and a framework for concordant action established. It is difficult to imagine that such arrangements will keep their present form.

It is likely that the Syrian conflict will continue unabated, while the prospects for a successful completion of the Iranian negotiations will probably dim—increasing the specter of a nuclearized Middle East.

Gains on other fronts could also be much harder to come by, due in part to the emergence of fresh crises of central authority in a number of countries in the region, most notably Iraq.

Looking to exploit longstanding frictions between Sunni and Shi'a across the region—and armed with a vitriolic ideology that distorts the teachings of Islam to an even greater extent than Al-Qaeda did in its heyday—the Islamic State has successfully waged a merciless scorched-earth

campaign of terror in an area the size of Jordan for the past few months. The Islamic State is becoming a non-state actor of the first order: militarily powerful, financially self-sustaining, accountable to no one, and recognizant of no existing international border or convention.

This grave menace to the foundation of the already weakened Middle East state system should be taken most seri-

ously; unless it is decisively countered, it may very well spread to other parts of the region and perhaps even beyond.

A testament to the gravity of the situation is that many actors which have for a long time been loath to work together are considering cooperation. The effectiveness of such an endeavor—as well as its longer-term effects on regional circumstances—could hinge on whether the existing conflicts between proxies throughout the Middle East can be brought under control.

Optimism about the Israeli-Palestinian peace process has also fallen to a new low. Barring some wholly unforeseen development, the prospects for reviving it will continue to wane. This could result in the loss of leverage by a number of stakeholders, and lead to a prolonged period of bellicosity, replete with unilateral moves and reactions.

The most recent Gaza war is but the latest manifestation of this worrisome trend. Another is the deepening fragmentation of Libya, which has exacerbated a series of low-intensity conflicts throughout the Sahel dry-lands, extending out to the Horn of Africa.

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by the dynamics of the U.S.-China relationship. The clear benefits for the two powers to strengthen cooperation in Asia, combined with the logic of Mutually-Assured Destruction, make it unlikely that ongoing tensions between them may spiral fully out of control, although this possibility should not be dismissed outright.

Beijing and Washington seem set to intensify the application of a ‘competitive cooperation’ strategy. But in doing

Despite several interventions, parts of the region remain safe-havens for separatist insurgents, terrorists and pirates. This is likely to further destabilize the belt of countries from the Atlantic down to the Gulf of Aden, many of which are classified by the UN as Least-Developed.

The situation in Asia is also a cause for concern. This is the region whose political, economic, social and environmental impact on the world has the potential to be as determinant as Europe’s in former times. Understanding Asia’s strategic trajectories has never been more relevant to global security and prosperity.

For the foreseeable future, Asian developments will be influenced

so, they will need to carefully guard against the hazard of being instrumentalized by local actors. This is especially important in light of the absence of an inclusive form of regional security architecture.

Perhaps a victim of its own success, the region is now less stable than it has been for quite some time. Until recently, most Asian countries were chiefly preoccupied with strengthening their state institutions and generating economic growth. Continued progress in these areas, however, is yielding to bellicose rhetoric and romanticized narratives of the past.

The significant buildup of national military capabilities has resulted in an unprecedented regional arms race, with Asia’s share of military imports now comprising more than 40 percent of the world’s total—up from 15 percent just two decades ago.

The escalation of conflicting territorial claims throughout the region—combined with the constant threat posed by a possible showdown on the Korean peninsula—remain sources of great concern.

Given Asia’s significance to the world economy, any recourse to arms—however limited in scope or scale—would surely take a toll on growth and stability throughout the globe.

THE EARTH’S EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

More blood has been shed by the hands of man over the past century than in any previous one in the long and tumultuous history of our race, in which close to 200 million people were killed on the fields of battle or through brutal schemes of tyrants and oppressors.

In so many corners of the globe over the past one hundred years, we took to one another with astounding ferocity—recklessly casting the die over and again in the selfish pursuit of particular advantage.

This is the heavy bequest we must carry forth, as we seek to address the sempiternal challenges to peace and security in a twenty-first-century environment characterized by interdependence, multipolarity, and globalization.

But in our times, humanity faces an additional danger—an existential crisis unlike any the world has experienced so far: the rapid physical deterioration of the Earth itself.

Despite some loud protestations to the contrary, the evidence is truly overwhelming: mankind is the primary cause of global warming and climate change. We are the reason the environment has been ravaged—why oceans keep rising and acidifying; freshwater reserves depleting; droughts worsening;

forests burning; many plant and animal species going extinct; and torrential rains becoming commonplace.

This is not going to stop; it will, as a matter of fact, keep getting worse and worse—if we continue to live under the illusion that a business as usual approach is permissible. Everywhere we look we can see the enormous effects of the planetary emergency that is playing out right before our eyes. It increasingly affects every nation, and none can hope to solve this challenge on their own.

In order to address it, we will need to embrace a new form of cooperation—beset by a series of concurrent, aspirational and bold measures—coordinated at the highest level by leaders who understand the imperative of putting sustainable development at the heart of the conduct of international relations in the twenty-first century.

In December 2015, two critical multilateral events are scheduled to convene. Both will take place in December 2015, and will be conducted under the auspices of the United Nations.

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affairs—and whether the conditions in nature prerequisite for continued human progress will be conserved, or will soon disappear.

Nothing so ambitious has ever been tried through multilateral diplomacy.

The first is the launch of the UN post-2015 agenda—a three-pronged process that requires the adoption of a set of ambitious and universal Sustainable Development Goals; putting in place options to finance them; and creating an enforceable mechanism to monitor their implementation.

The second is COP21—a landmark climate change conference that is supposed to produce a comprehensive, legally-binding agreement to keep global warming below two degrees Celsius.

The outcomes of these two summits will largely determine whether humanity has the will to profoundly change how we conceive and execute our economic, social, and environmental

There are two basic ways forward. The first is to create a new specialized global body to deal with this problem, at enormous cost in time and resources. The other is to use the best one we have, adapting it to the changing circumstances, as required. For better or worse, that is the United Nations.

Leaders will need to agree on how to fully harness the unique convening power of the United Nations for this task. In my opinion, this will require making use of the UN's existing institutional framework to forge a new sort of global compact—one that at long last steps fully beyond the shadow cast by the Great War over the world for the past hundred years.

A revitalized, reformed, and effective UN needs to be at the fulcrum of the multilateral efforts of the international community; in these transformative times, a modernized UN has to become the functional center for harmonizing mankind's response to a series of interrelated threats far more insidious than any faced in history.

But this will not happen by inertia or automation. It will require leadership—leadership that can inspire and encourage both developed and developing nations to cease misaligning their short-term priorities with the world's long-term needs; leadership to urgently attend to this generation's highest call: the peaceful transformation of *raison d'état* into *raison de planète*. ●