

PATTERNS AND POWER: AN ESSAY

Introduction

It was 1999 and the world was preparing for the Millennium, and a new beginning. I was married with a five year old son, with the same hopes and excitement other parents have for their children. The future appeared hopeful. There were still wars in the world, but they seemed small enough and far enough away to offer no threat. Kosovo was in Europe – another Balkan war was looming – but Dayton had put an end to the previous one, or at least created an uneasy peace, there seemed no reason for undue anxiety.

Then I noticed, Russia was opposing the West's position on Kosovo. Like a pattern vision, I could see the links between contemporary politics and the past – history had not ended. It was clear that the new century would be no different than all the previous ones, with a definite unease that it would be even worse. I had no idea why this should be so, but I began to seek the answer. It took me several years to come to my conclusion: power. In every war in history power, manifested in the form of interest, was present. And it was the determining factor in whether to go to war or not: whether that course would advance a nation's interests or harm them. In general terms it comes in three types: a rising nation's need to gain power; an existing nation's need to retain it; a declining nation's need to regain it.

Then there rose the question of why nations keep fighting wars: it is because they are not prepared to give up the one thing they all fight over – power. They do attempt to avoid war: but are not prepared or able to give up its cause. As a result, I have concluded, every nation or civilization (whatever particular description might apply) eventually gets the war it is seeking to avoid; and will continue to do so unless this fact is accepted and changed – the ghosts of history listened to.

I am not an academic and am deeply indebted to historians, and scholars of other disciplines. Their work has directed me to my conclusions. Their works have allowed me examine the subject in the secondary sources, in the confidence of the answers I found. Their methodology, objectivity, scientific thinking has brought me to the truth.

The way the world was in 1999, and the way it is now, convinces me more of that truth. Under Putin Russia began to reassert itself on the world stage. That re-emergence continues today, though perhaps indolently enough, the slow westward movement in the Ukraine, the continued rebuilding of its nuclear and conventional forces and threats that Russia will intervene further in its near-abroad; pushed on always by the cold logic of interest. All this has unnerving similarity with the past. While it is surmise to argue that the crisis in the Middle East is really a dangerous struggle between the USA and Russia (Iranian alliance the ultimate prize), the pattern fits uncomfortably with the tragic course of human history. The hopes of the ‘Arab Spring’ would always be dashed by the hidden objectives of international power politics. In the Far East, the approaching war between America and China – once again all the hallmarks of the unstoppable consequences of power struggles – the former seeking to maintain its status, the latter to supplant it. There are numerous examples where our shrinking world can be plunged ultimately into nuclear war.

I shall lay out my arguments that the patterns of history are heading in this direction by showing that power has motivated wars, that seem inescapable, and that we are no different today than we were in any earlier age. This essay begins in a time of history that is bountiful in reliable historical records. Somewhat arbitrarily, I shall start at the beginning of the second millennium, in Ireland, as that is where I am from, but will draw in history from other parts of the world to support my case (conscious always that a small island like mine is never free of the consequences of global events).

A New Millennium

In the year 1014 AD there was a battle in a place called Clontarf, near Viking Dublin. The city of Dublin was founded in the 9th century by Norse raiders and became a major centre for trade. She imported precious metals, silks, spices, amber, jet, pottery, tin, salt, wine and horses, walrus ivory from the north Atlantic, soapstone from the Scottish Isles, and weapons, pottery and glass from North West Europe. She exported hides, leather, wool, cloth, furs, jewellery and – above all – slaves. The Gaelic hinterland provided the timber for the Viking ships, cattle for meat and hides, arable land for the crops to make bread and ale. The diet of the urban population was varied and healthy: the country offered pickings of wild strawberries, apples, cherries, plums, sloes, blackberries, rowans and hazelnuts.

Ui Briuin Cualann was the tribe to the south of the Viking settlement and was quick to make peace with the new invaders, the commercial advantage apparent. To the Vikings they provided not just a trading partner, but also security, a buffer zone between their commercial town and hostile Irish tribes beyond the mountains. They were confident, as far as they could be, in Ui Briuin Cualann loyalty. The tribe stood by when the powerful Southern O'Neill attacked Dublin in its bid to rule the whole island. To rule Ireland a tribe had to rule Dublin; so it was attacked or allied with depending on which served a tribe's objective of gaining island-wide power. Whatever accounts centuries later suggest – and the need for a truth they fulfil – power was the motive for the Battle of Clontarf on Good Friday 1014. Also supporting the Ostmen was the powerful King of Leinster, against his rival Brian Boru, who in turn had a duplicitous and also self-serving ally in Mael Sechnaill, who too coveted the title of High King of Ireland. The outcome of the battle is less important than the motivation embedded in the politics of it.

Nothing Changes

A-half century later news would arrive on these shores, a battle at a place called Hastings in England. No one would have thought that one hundred years on its significance would be felt here. Irish tribes were still fighting for supremacy of Ireland. In 1169 the strategic city of Dublin was once again the location. Dermot McMurrrough, King of Leinster, had brought that disgruntled Cambro-Norman baron Richard fitz Gilbert de Clare (popularly known as Strongbow) across from Wales in his bid for the kingship of the whole island. The maxim – who ruled Dublin ruled Ireland – still applied. The Leinster king, along with his foreign allies, marched on the city, its ruler Askulv MacTurcaill. Their victory was swift and Askulv fled, later to return from York with a fleet of fellow-Danes. Ui Briuin Cualann were still allies and Askulv expected their assistance. But things were complicated for their king, Macgilla Mocholmoc, who by this time was married to Strongbow's sister-in-law, and no doubt aware of the rising power of the new Norman warrior elites sweeping the country. So when he brought his army to the walls of Dublin, he stood them back to see how the battle would go (much like Mael Sechnaill had done a century and a half before). He was too weak to choose his own allies. At first it went well for the Danes. But the tide turned when the heavily armoured Norman cavalry sallied out and cut through the besiegers. It was now clear which way the battle was going, and Mocholmoc sent in his warriors to join his new masters and help

slaughter the Norsemen. 2,000 of them were said to have been killed in the fields and moors around Dublin. The Gaelic chief had chosen wisely, but the threat to his power was not over – he would have to choose again. The Normans were becoming so powerful they were making allies of natural enemies, wherever the interests lie. An alliance was forming: the High King of Ireland was marching on Dublin from the west with a huge army. Another Viking fleet, this time that of Godred the Black, prince of the Isle of Man, fearing he could be the next target of Norman expansion, had arrived in Dublin Bay. This time the Cuala chief judged wrongly: the Normans were the victors again. A surprise attack that summer night 1171 on their besiegers confirmed them as the rulers of Dublin; the rest would follow. As for Mocholmoc, there was still some hope: even the master has a master. For Strongbow that was King Henry II of England, who was keen to curb the ambitious lord, who looked set to carve out a kingdom for himself on this western isle. The sovereign came to Ireland and forced de Clare into submission. Irish chiefs, including Mocholmoc, also recognized Henry as their lord, accepting the reality of the moment.

In the early 14th century Ireland was inextricably linked to the wars between England and Scotland. And it brought strife and division. King of the powerful O'Neills in Ulster invited Edward Bruce, brother of Robert, victor of Bannockburn, to be High King of Ireland. He stressed the commonality of language, custom and blood the Irish shared with the Scottish race: there was also the prospect of an influx of Gallowglass mercenaries to fight the encroaching English colonists, securing his core territorial interests in the north of Ireland. But O'Neill had limited support in his call for an alliance with Scotland; many Irish chiefs did not see it as serving their interests. For their part the Bruces saw the advantage of gaining this island as an ally against their English enemies; though they had courted both Gaelic chiefs and the colonial nobility with regard to their strategic aims. But it was in alliance with Domhnall O'Neill that they embarked upon a three year war in Ireland, wrecking devastation upon the whole island, which cruelly coincided with a great Europe-wide famine from 1315-17.

Ireland could never escape the effects of foreign wars. And when there were none, the Hiberno-Norman magnates were fighting among themselves for dominance, often in alliance with Gaelic tribes; they were happy to employ them against fellow-colonists, just as the Irish were happy to join forces with colonists against others of their own race. With the Wars of the Roses, and

consequence of defeat by France in the Hundred Year War, Ireland could not escape. That civil war – or more a bitter family feud – drew in factions; a dispute between the House of Lancaster and the House of York, both claiming the English throne through descent from sons of Edward III. In such situations others have to choose sides carefully, which best serve their interest, whether an Anglo-Irish baron or a native kern mercenary. The Wars of the Roses is another example where power is the determining motive for conflict; no different to the motives of the Irish in the examples already mentioned.

Events that lead one person to the throne and not another appear random. Richard II became king of England as a child due to the death of his elder brother, The Black Prince, with his uncle John of Gaunt acting as regent until he came of age. When he did, the conflicts with the nobility grew, many of the magnates enjoying virtual independence of the crown. Richard II was overthrown and replaced by his cousin, Henry Duke of Lancaster. England's defeat in the Hundred Years War would open the way for decades of strife. After Castillon the English nobility focused on power at court, many seeking compensation for losing lands in France. In 1455, at St Albans, the first battle was fought over which branch of the one family would rule England, House of Lancaster or House York, for the same reason – power. There Richard of York prevailed over Margaret of Anjou, a queen fighting on behalf of her mentally incapacitated husband, and for the future of her son and heir. For thirty years the two houses fought, on and off. One noble, the Duke of Warwick, ally of King Edward IV, switched his loyalties to the Lancastrians, which best served his ambitions, and joined in alliance with Queen Margaret, his arch enemy from the first Battle of St Albans. But Edward would finally beat the House of Lancaster, and Warwick, who died, at the Battle of Barnet. Edward, and the House of York, ruled peacefully until his death. Upon which, his brother Richard, Duke of Gloucester, seized the throne. He ruled until killed at the Battle of Bosworth, bringing the Wars of the Roses to an end and the obscure Welch nobleman, Henry Tudor, to the throne.

With the 16th century came the Reformation, Henry VIII's break with Rome and the dissolution of the monasteries. From here on, the struggle for power in Ireland took on the language of the Reformation, and later Counter-Reformation. At this time crown control was mostly confined to Dublin and the east of the country. From the walls of Dublin Castle a viewer could see the dark outline of the forested Wicklow Mountains to the south. In those wooded

fastnesses were two Irish tribes, the O'Byrnes and the O'Tooles, who were a constant thorn in the side of the English authorities. Their struggle with the English was centuries old. To look at any chronology one would find it difficult to point out any difference between the disputes of the pre-Reformation and post-Reformation periods. They had raided the hinterland of Dublin, burning homesteads and making off with cattle and chattels. The reality of these attacks created unease among the settlers of the four Dublin shires, as it no doubt did for many remaining Gaelic inhabitants. Unknown were the causes that might bring attack from the mountains: internal blood strife; cruelty of nature destroying crops and livestock; or being pushed farther into harsher lands by other Irish tribes being displaced by conflict. Their decision to go to war was sometimes based on advantages presented by foreign wars, foreign wars that arrived on Irish soil.

During the reign of Henry VIII, the O'Byrnes and O'Tooles joined in the rebellion of 'Silken' Thomas, when he denounced the English king as a heretic. Thomas Fitzgerald, son of the ninth Earl of Kildare who at that time was imprisoned in the Tower of London, was doing his father's work: rebelling as a show of force to persuade the king to leave the rule of Ireland to that powerful family, otherwise they would make the island ungovernable. The Fitzgerald rebellion was crushed and the crown authorities came to dominate the governance of Ireland. Gaelic tribes such as the O'Byrnes and O'Tooles withdrew support for the rebellion when it became clear it would be defeated. The breaking of Geraldine hold on power presented opportunities. But circumstances also forced clans to focus on core interests – to secure their own tribal interests. For example the lord of the O'Byrnes agreed peace terms that included providing forces against rebellious fellow- Gaelic tribes. Neighbouring O'Tooles also made peace with the crown. The tribe was the first to make a deal with Henry under the policy of Surrender and Regrant, where if a chief accepted the king as his overlord he would be given legal title to his lands in return. Turlough O'Toole was received as a guest by the Tudor king in the opulent surroundings of Hampton Court, Christmas 1540. The deals did result in a period of peace from the mountains south of the capital, Dublin. Instead of fighting the forces of the king in the Pale they joined his forces in fighting his wars against the Scots.

Under Elizabeth I the inroad into the colonization and pacification of Ireland continued. Much of the second half of the 16th century was spent attempting to

conquer Gaelic Ulster, where native power was still substantial. Yet the crown was prepared to be conciliatory, diplomatic solutions being cheaper. As for the Ulster chiefs, their ultimate objective was to stop, if possible reverse, the erosion of their territories. At times the power base of the larger tribes was undermined when vassal tribes saw their own interests best served by alliance with the English. Kin was no guarantee of unity: families so often fought among themselves for the chieftdom.

When Conn O'Neill made peace with the Lord Deputy, Sir Anthony St Leger, he received the feudal title, Earl of Tyrone, to complement his Gaelic royal lineage. The agreement confirmed his authority within the Ulster territories. There was also convenient ambiguity regarding his authority over lesser lords in the province. The earldom would pass to his illegitimate son, Matthew, Baron of Dungannon, bypassing his eldest legitimate son, Shane, though younger than his favoured half-brother. So Shane had him killed, supported by other branches of the O'Neills, who under old Brehon Law had been entitled to bid for chief of the clan. Shane O'Neill was ambitious; that would be his nemesis. He began harassing smaller septs, traditionally subservient to the O'Neill, who were seeking security in alliance with the English. The biggest challenge to O'Neill dominance were the O'Donnells of Tyrconnell, who had their own set of vassals, which Shane was determined to take. In May 1565 Shane O'Neill crushed the O'Donnells at the Battle of Glenshesk. He was now viewed by the English authorities as the greatest obstacle to the anglicization of the northern province.

Colonization seems to have its own logic: when one piece of territory has been acquired, then contiguous lands have to be taken in due course. So the Lord Deputy, Sir Henry Sidney, set out on campaign against the Earl of Tyrone, winning the loyalty of lesser Gaelic lords in the north – O'Reilly, Maguire and MacMahon – and restoring the O'Donnell to his ancestral territories. Shane O'Neill had become too strong to win by dividing: any differences former vassals could have had were dwarfed by the threat of his strength. His strength weakened him, and at Farsetmore in County Donegal his army was routed. In desperation he sought to negotiate an alliance with bitter enemies, the O'Donnell, who weren't totally adverse to the idea of a deal. Unfortunately for O'Neill they got a better offer – from the English. At a banquet he was knifed to death, his head preserved in salt and sent to Dublin.

By the end of the century things had changed. The O'Donnell lands were themselves being encroached upon because of English colonization. The O'Donnells would be the driving force leading to the Nine Years' War. Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, and the man who the English now saw as the greatest hope of introducing English laws and customs to Ulster, was more reticent than Red Hugh, ruler of the O'Donnells. Hugh O'Neill's entry into the Nine Years' War was preceded by a long period of allegiance to the crown, albeit for his own personal motive of becoming chief of the entire clan, of which there were four main competing branches. Rivals were as quick as Hugh O'Neill to seek English support to further their own interests. Hugh O'Neill fought against one of the lesser Irish chieftains, Hugh Maguire, who had rebelled against the gradual dismantling of his lordship. But the alliance between O'Neill and the English was an illusion. O'Neill saw dangerous intentions in crown support for Gaelic chiefs who had traditionally been vassals of his clan. The process was not going in his favour – in the long term. The Nine Years' War started in June 1694 when Red Hugh O'Donnell and Hugh Maguire besieged the English fortress in Enniskillen. When O'Neill realized he would not be granted right to rule all of Ulster as a palatinate – his desire all along – he joined the rebellion, while always keeping the lines of communications with the enemy open. In defeat he achieved the terms he had sought. But it wasn't to last.

The above are examples – of which there is many more, consistently demonstrating that interest (power) is present in every conflict of history. It is as much a part of the pattern of history as the continuous cycle of war and peace. And it is inescapable to conclude that pattern and power are connected.

New Age New Hope?

But from the 17th century we define ourselves as entering the Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, gone the Medieval world. But nothing had truly changed; and still hasn't to this day. '...The principal security issues faced by Europeans have remained remarkably constant over the centuries. The concepts, if not the language, of encirclement, buffers, balancing, failed states and pre-emption...' 1
The 17th century was still much concerned with the religious divisions in Europe. Not twenty years into it saw the start of the Thirty Years War, a conflict fought ostensibly between Reformation and Counter Reformation, and called the last war of religion. In reality it was a struggle for the dominance of Europe – power. 2

That war began with the Bohemian Revolt when Habsburg emperor Ferdinand II tried to re-impose imperial control in Germany. He was a devout Roman Catholic, warrior of the Counter Reformation, and apparently willing to destroy the religious pluralism that had resulted from the Peace of Augsburg. The Thirty Years War would become the iconic example of religious warfare, and has been described as the last war of religion. But it was not a clear cut struggle between Protestantism and Catholicism. Many fought alongside those they were opposed to in matters of faith. For example the Elector of Saxony John George I, a committed Lutheran, favoured a Catholic ruler because it presented the best means of stopping the advance of Brandenburg. Most importantly, Catholic France, allied herself with Protestant powers to defeat the Habsburg hegemony over Europe, and ultimately to replace the rival Catholic dynasty over who dominated the continent. It was power not religion that determined the policies of the different states.

As three decades of war came to an end on the continent, another was also reaching a conclusion on the western fringes. In September 1649 Cromwell arrived in Ireland with a large army to avenge the atrocities committed in the rebellion that broke out eight years before. He was facing an alliance between the rebels Irish and the remaining royalist forces of defeated and executed King Charles I, the two sides that were fighting each other in the autumn of 1641; they had found a common enemy in the parliamentarians. Cromwell was convinced that the enemy was Popery, which was the instigation of bloody atrocities committed against Protestants, over which Protestantism had to triumph. He moved quickly to take Drogheda, held by a joint English and Irish garrison. He moved swiftly on to Wexford. It was not long before the country had been retaken and the Cromwellian Plantation could begin, Protestant settlers replacing Catholic tenants and landowners. Whatever one thinks about the historical legacy of the individual, Cromwell was not averse to fighting other Protestant states when it suited the interests of the Commonwealth; and would even ally with Catholic states if that best served its interests. The United Provinces of the Netherlands was Protestant – and a republic – but was treated with suspicion by Oliver Cromwell because it had supported Charles in the English Civil Wars. It had also, in the Commonwealth's view, taken commercial advantage during that conflict. The Dutch had become the leading maritime trading nation in Europe, threatening the commercial interests of England. The introduction of the Navigation Acts failed to reverse the situation, negotiations were attempted and failed (Cromwell had offered to drop the Acts

in return for an anti-Habsburg alliance – the Dutch refused), so the two sides went to war. The Commonwealth was also at war with Catholic Spain, who in turn was at war with Catholic France, part of the titan struggle for dominance between Bourbon and Habsburg. The Anglo-Spanish rivalry was also over commercial interests. Religious differences could be overlooked. Lord Protector Cromwell signed a treaty of alliance with Cardinal Mazarin, providing 3,000 battle-hardened parliamentarian soldiers to support the army of King Louis XIV. Though in fairness to him, Cromwell extracted concessions for French Huguenots.

In July 1690 a battle was fought on Irish soil, one that would grow in symbolism and myth over the following centuries, a battle that was part of a largely foreign war. On the continent, the Stadholder of the Dutch Provinces, William, prince of the House of Orange, had been trying to convince the republic that it should invade England to overthrow the Catholic king and replace him with a Protestant monarch. But many of the Dutch were more concerned in gaining England as ally against France than being delivered from Catholicism, for the Netherlands had come near to what all powers struggle to avoid – utter defeat – at the hands of an earlier Anglo-French alliance. France had the strength to overwhelm the loose confederation that made up that small but rich mercantile state. The Dutch knew this: as did William. For them peace was necessary for trade. But William feared that Catholic James II of England would fall into Louis's orbit of influence, something he could not contemplate. Many suspected William's motive was more for his own personal power rather than Holland's needs. Over time he managed to persuade the doubters and gradually an alliance against France, now the superpower of Europe, was formed. Because in the shadows lurked the spectre of another Anglo-French alliance. The revocation of the Edict of Nantes and the bloody persecution of French Huguenots gave the merchants moral justification: now they saw themselves acting on principal, against a ruler determined to destroy Protestantism (yet one that would go to war against a Catholic adversary). Holy Roman Emperor, Leopold, was as much a champion of Catholicism as Louis: yet they would stand opposing each other on the battlefield. Leopold had driven back the Ottomans from the gates of Vienna to widespread relief of Christendom, while the Bourbons stood back to best serve their own interests; the Habsburg defeat of the Turks meant France could be next. Revoking the Edict of Nantes was a strike for the faith and way of attracting Catholic princes back under the influence of The Sun King. Leopold might have driven back the

infidels but as master of continental Europe he had a conflict: power and conscience; how could he reconcile his religious ideals with his political ones? But he fought Louis because the French king was the greatest challenge to his power, whether or not he had theological dilemmas. The wrestle for power superseded everything. From differing interests, states with differing religions joined against the burgeoning power of France. This was the backdrop to the Battle of the Boyne.

The Security of Power

When Frederick the Great came to the throne of Prussia in 1740 he inherited a kingdom that he saw as weak and insecure. He identified that flaw in Prussia's predicament that needed to be remedied – and reversed. And it was reversed: and Prussia came to dominate the Germanic peoples; was to be the driving force for a united Germany and empire; and develop into the industrial engine house of Europe. It would be two hundred years before his kingdom met the fate he had been desperate to save it from, when he described himself (and by logical extension Prussia) as a traveller on the road 'who sees himself surrounded by a bunch of rogues, who are planning to murder him and divide up the spoils among themselves'.³

Frederick sought to unify his disconnected lands. To this end he needed the mineral-rich province of Silesia, ruled by the Austrian Habsburg dynasty. Prussia also saw a risk that the Augustus III, King of Poland and Elector of Saxony, could conquer Silesia to link up his own divided territories. So he chose to make a pre-emptive strike. Using his – at this time still small – army he took the province from Austria, and would hold on to it. By the end of his reign, at times victory looked no means certain, Frederick had established Prussia as one of the great powers of Europe, having doubled the size of the kingdom, setting it on course to become master of the Germanic races. With territorial aggrandizement and increased prestige, Frederick the Great had achieved what he had sought for Prussia from the outset – security.

Frederick was a man of the Enlightenment, supporter of progress through rational thought. He was intolerant of any form of revealed religion.⁴ He was so different to the rulers of his time, though many of them were also influenced by enlightenment ideas, such as Catherine the Great of Russia (though she dropped them quickly when aristocratic heads started dropping into baskets during the French Revolution).⁵

But could Frederick's foreign policy have been any different if he had been a conservative, devout Calvinist like his father? Regardless of one's philosophical or religious beliefs the hard realities of geopolitics will determine people's actions in the field. As quoted above, man about to be set upon by rogues, fear is the reality when contemplating defeat, and its avoidance always the determinant of actions.

The imperial expansion of Russia was also driven by a need for security. By the end of the 17th century it was already a Eurasian power, but to maintain that position it also had to become a European power; a direction dictated by geopolitical factors. It had no natural features, like Spain had the Pyrenees, to protect it from other aggressors. To Russia's west were some very formidable powers. Sweden dominated the Baltic coast, including the entire Gulf of Finland, Poland encroached dangerously to the west. To Russia's south, the Ottoman Empire ruled the Balkans and much of the Caucasus. The Crimean Khanate, Turkish client, ruled over the northern coastline of the Black Sea, and was a constant menace to the open steppes into the heartland of Russia.⁶ Tsar Peter's defeat of Sweden meant Russia now had access to the Baltic Sea. The needs of security and commerce were met. But Russia needed access to the Mediterranean if she was to exploit her position on the Eurasian landmass, establishing herself as an intermediary for trade between the East and West – far more profitable. But the Ottoman Empire blocked the way through the Straits. This direction would mark the origin of the 'Eastern Question'.⁷ For the next two centuries Russia would fight a string of wars with the Ottomans, the Straits one of its driving motives. As Russian expansion took control of the Black Sea exit to the Mediterranean became increasingly vital. By the time of the First World War it had arguably become the single most important strategic interest. So much of Russia's exports went through the Straits the route amounted to a commercial umbilical cord for the nation.⁸

Two hundred years on from when Prussia began its rise to greatness, the now German Empire was facing the prospects of fighting a war on two fronts. Prussia had become a continental power in the 1700s, saved the day at Waterloo in 1815 and set about forging the disparate Germanic peoples into one nation, then one empire. Prussian Junker, Otto Von Bismarck, was the driving force in Germany's rise to dominance in the second half of the 19th century. He had beaten the Hapsburgs for control of the Germans, and cast the dynasty out of what had been its domain since the days of the old Holy Roman Empire. At the

Battle of Königgrätz the Prussian army crushed the Austrian forces and ejected the old empire from the nascent German nation. Four years later Bismarck launched an attack against France, quickly defeating her – the German Empire was founded. During his chancellorship, Bismarck had sought to hold on to the huge gains Prussia had made. To do this he entered into a series of alliances: his aim, to prevent other powers joining in alliance against Germany, most critically to keep France isolated. By the end of the 1880s the Bismarckian Alliance System boasted The Triple Alliance with Austria and Italy and the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia; France was unable to form an anti-German coalition. But there were limits to Bismarck's diplomacy, especially regards Russia, which had vital interests in the Balkans that were bringing it into conflict with Austria. Under the Reinsurance Treaty Germany would support Russia's objectives in the Turkish Straits and keep out of a war between Russia and a third power. There were those who opposed the treaty, some calling for a pre-emptive strike against Russia. After Bismarck was dismissed in 1890 his successor Leo Von Capri let it lapse. The thinking was that the differences between France, Russia and Britain were too great to forge a lasting coalition against Germany. The thinking was wrong.

Towards the end of the 19th century Germany was making plans to fight a war on two fronts, hence Schlieffen Plan. But there were movements towards detente. One area where Germany thought it could expand without too much risk of conflict with other powers was the Ottoman Empire. Since the 1880s Germany had increased investment in the region, at the encouragement of Constantinople, the sultan's reaction to the British occupation of Egypt in 1882. By investing in the empire – especially in infrastructural projects – Berlin hoped to stabilize the Ottoman region. And when the long predicted collapse of the empire finally happened Germany wanted to be 'at the table when the spoils were divided'.⁹ The pursuit of commercial imperial interests would bring it closer to the Straits – so vital to Russia – and to the war of interest that would have to ensue. The Russian response, as discussed above, only 'fully makes sense if we read it against the background of the Russian leadership's deepening anxiety about the future of the Turkish Straits'.¹⁰

True motives

Nations' foreign policies, and the consequences, are determined by interest and power. By the mid 19th century Britain was unquestionably the greatest imperial power on the planet. By 1833 slavery had been abolished throughout

its vast empire. The Royal Navy interdicted vessels on the high seas that were suspected of transporting slaves. Tangible policies, both in legislature and enforcement, were pursued by British governments. The English statesman, Lord Palmerston, was an abolitionist yet supported the Confederate South in the American Civil War. Dissolution of the Union would weaken the United States, and enhance British power. The Southern Confederacy 'would afford a valuable and extensive market for British manufactures'.¹¹ William Gladstone also had similar contradictions between principles and interest when it came to slavery.¹² Our moral positions on issues conceal our motives. The purpose of Gladstone's comments in 1876 about the 'Bulgarian horrors' was 'to justify intervention to prevent Constantinople falling into Russian hands'.¹³

Five years before that Benjamin Disraeli addressed the British House of Commons about the implications of the Franco-Prussian War and the new German Empire. The emergence of imperial Germany was even a more shattering event than the French Revolution, he told parliament. But his main concern was not the rising Germany but the implications for the Treaty of Paris signed in 1856 to conclude the Crimean War. The purpose of that treaty was to keep Britain's old foe, Russia, out of the Constantinople and the Straits, where it could disrupt British sea and land routes to India. This theme would remain central to British foreign policy until 1914.¹⁴ Many key policy makers in Whitehall saw Russia as the real threat to the interests of the Empire. The best way to secure those interests was a full alliance with Russia – an unfriendly Russia was more dangerous than an unfriendly Germany. There was a fear that Russia might join in alliance with Germany.¹⁵ Britain joining alongside France and Russia against Germany was a means to control Russia. Remaining neutral would leave Britain friendless – whichever side won – her global interests threatened.¹⁶

The formation of the German Empire, the cause of Britain eventually entering the war of 1914, was also the root cause of the Franco-Russian Alliance in the 1890s. France's defeat by Prussia left the nation traumatized and with a deep grievance; and a need to contain this formidable power on her eastern border – through military alliance. The nation that could force Germany to fight a war on two fronts was Russia. Germany's response to this was to attach Russia to its own alliance, thus the Three Emperors' League – Germany, Russia and Austria. But the rivalries between St Petersburg and Vienna were too fundamental to allow such an arrangement to work. Bismarck's diplomacy was aimed at

preventing the European powers forming a coalition against Germany. By the late 1880s the chancellor had built arrangements with virtually every continental power: the Triple Alliance with Austria and Italy; the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia; the Mediterranean Agreement mediated by Bismarck between Britain, Italy and Austria.

Existential Threat

As for Austria, the long distinguished dynastic history of the Habsburg family was drawing to a close. Much like the Ottoman Empire, it was in terminal decline: and Turkish decline was hastening its own. Serbia had already broken away from Constantinople and was seeking to create a Greater Serbia, uniting all the Slavic peoples in the region; something Vienna saw as an existential threat to the fragile, multiethnic Austria-Hungarian Empire. Some Serbian territorial expansion could be accepted, but under no circumstances to push its borders to the Adriatic coast, where a Serbian port might come under the control of a foreign power, namely Russia. The First Balkan War, which was feared could develop into a broader conflict, was finally ended with the creation of Albania – a bulwark for Austria. But the proverbial ink was hardly dry when the Second Balkan War broke out, Serbia making significant gains in yet another short conflict. Belgrade was also occupying parts of Albania, which it was supposed to have left under the peace terms of the First Balkan War – ignoring repeated Austrian warnings. Finally an ultimatum had to be made: Serbia had eight days to vacate Albanian territory or face the consequences. It seemed ultimatums worked, a policy the Austrian government pursued after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in June 1914.¹⁷ During the lead up to the First World War Vienna was reconciled to acting unilaterally to protect its vital interests. The dying Habsburgs dynasty was in a dire predicament. ‘Austria, which like any other state believed in a right of self-preservation, could not meekly accept disintegration’.¹⁸

Interest led all the parties to the First World War. Austria saw itself fighting for survival. Germany, as well as having growing commercial considerations, would support Austria in a ‘localized war’ against Serbia to reduce the length of the battlefield it would have to fight in a future war against France and Russia.¹⁹ For Russia, control of the Straits was essential to its economic and political viability. France moved into alliance with Russia to create another front that Germany would have to fight, driven by the humiliation of 1870 and the loss of Alsace and Lorraine. Britain had core interests in the Mediterranean,

critical for the Suez Canal and land routes to other parts of her empire farther east.

While facts can be debated, new ones discovered and existing ones reassessed, power (in the manifestation of interest) is always the motivate – throughout history. The humanly understandable desire for continued existence is one form. There are other ways we pursue our interests as far as war: commercial/economic, security and stability; whatever serves the interest of power. That is the underlying cause. Historians can debate, for example culpability, as in the Fischer Thesis that puts the blame for the First World War on Germany or the critics of those arguments.²⁰ But none of the arguments change the fact that the protagonists in that war, or any war, acted for any other reason other than what they believed was the best interest of their country, whether that reason was morally perverse or not. It does show that nations eventually get the war they are trying to avoid; three out of the five main players mentioned above did. Austria convinced herself ultimatum against Serbia would work, as it had done in 1913. German stuck resolutely to the idea that the war could be kept localized. And Russia, attempting to avoid strangulation at the Straits, was instead brought down by internal revolution.

Nations rigidly stick to the demands of power, no doubt fearful of the consequences of sacrificing it, unable to contemplate that reality. They deceive themselves, convinced a set course will bring the desired result; that catastrophe can be diverted by bluffing.²¹

Nothing has Changed

These powers all got the war they were desperately trying to avoid – still a sombre warning today. Jumping forward a hundred years, we congratulate ourselves that we are living in more civilized times, that the danger of world war died with the Cold War, and that we are not capable of making the mistakes of the past. We have had two world wars, what makes people so certain we won't have another? The world doesn't look that safe when you look around: Russia is expanding westwards; the EU appears to be fragmenting, certainly its future less clear; China and the United States are stepping closer to inevitable war, based on history, all we have to go on; the Middle East is in turmoil, even more frightening if seen as a Russo-American rivalry (the position of Iran critical, a very valuable ally for each power). All the powers – today as in the past – are driven by interest, which seems to be an unshakeable motive.

Surely these differences can be resolved peacefully in our progressive society? How could we possibly make the same mistakes that led to the first and second world wars, and didn't the Cold War end peacefully? If the answer to the first question is that we can solve our problems peacefully and to the second, that we could not possibly make the mistakes of the past, pointing to the peaceful outcome of the Cold War – we are blindly walking towards world war three.

A sense of delusion, as exemplified in the days leading up to 1914, presents itself today in the certainty that any future global conflict of that scale is an impossibility. There only has to be two parties to any war. All are motivated by interest, but only one has to be deluded to the consequences of their actions for the other (or others) to have to respond in furtherance of their interests. Then, even they have to convince themselves that the outcome can be positive.

The defenders of nuclear Deterrence claim that policy kept the peace post-1945. That is a reasonable argument. Unfortunately (even if it had in the Cold War) deterrence can become an incentive in the present or future. Recently a debate arose when Jeremy Corbyn, Labour leader, said if he were prime minister he would not give the order to launch Britain's Trident nuclear missiles.

Suggestions were raised that others might have acted in a similar way during the Cold War.²² In a BBC Radio 4 documentary, Denis Healy, Defence secretary in the 1960s, when asked if he would retaliate with nuclear weapons after a Soviet first strike said: 'I would find it very, very difficult indeed to use a nuclear weapon – and I think most people would. I think I would still have said that that, I'm afraid, is no reason for doing something like that...because most people you would kill would be innocent people.'²³ The documentary raised the question of how an enemy might act if he suspected he would face no retaliation. In a crisis situation, where there seems no way of extracting oneself from the confrontation – unlike the Cuban Missile Crisis – a government might delude itself that there will be no retaliation; the country's population, social/economic infrastructure will be left intact – an incentive to launch a nuclear attack, because in a world war to be left with your population and buildings undamaged is clear victory.

'...If the potential foe thought that we might not retaliate once the threat served no purpose—that retaliatory "deterrence" would, in essence, turn out to be a bluff—it would encourage those disposed to strike first to cause a nuclear holocaust without fear of reprisal.'²⁴

The doubt has been sown. Deluded reasoning (I don't mean in a medical sense, I am not a doctor) could conclude that a third world war can be fought without using weapons of mass destruction at all. The argument could go: in the Second World War Germany was believed to have had massive stockpiles of chemical weapons; even Hitler never used them in battle. The Nazis never used them because they feared a massive retaliation from the allies with similar weapons.

But the historical reality could be far more practical. The Germans did have quantities of nerve gas for use against the D-Day invasion, which could have seriously hindered the operation or even caused it to fail altogether. After the war, when Hermann Goring was being interrogated, he was asked why they were never used. He replied, the Wehrmacht depended on horse-drawn transport to move supplies to the combat units. But the gas masks they had developed for horses were ineffective, unable to pass enough pure air to allow the animals to pull the carts. Thus, the use of gas was of no use to the Germans in those conditions.²⁵ There seemed to be practical reasons for their non-use. Even in the first war, the benefits have been questioned. 'A vast majority of WWI historians argue that chemical weapons had no decisive effect on the outcome of the war... chemical weapons were an ineffective weapon and a waste of resources...The strategic power of chemical weapons in WWI was in the psychological terror they caused rather than the number of soldiers they killed: Poison gas was responsible for less than 1% of WWI's fatalities and about 7% of its casualties.'²⁶

Decision-makers could convince themselves the enemy would not use weapons of mass destruction – nuclear, chemical and biological – referencing their non-use in World War Two; but perilously, ignore the practical rather than retaliatory considerations for non-use.

It would be foolish to assume that the next world war could be fought without nuclear weapons. The use of nuclear weapons was from the beginning built into military planning and scenarios, and still is. They will be used in any final effort to avoid defeat. 'All the nuclear weapon-possessing states continue to prioritize nuclear deterrence as the cornerstone of their national security strategies.'²⁷

Of course, the Cold War did end without nuclear holocaust and the triumph of the West. But now we are entering a new cold war, in which 'the danger of nuclear war could quickly return...It would be deeply misguided' to ignore

current developments.²⁸ Even more so if we enter the mindset of thinking we could never face a crisis as great as the one that ended in 1991. We would be deceiving ourselves into a false sense of security.

In conclusion, the pattern of history is clear: we keep returning to war; in every war interest is present, and the determinant of policy; nations delude themselves into thinking the chosen course of action will bring success. The need for power decides that: and power will not be given up under any circumstances. Eventually nations have to, though in denial, fight the war they are trying to avoid.

We are still sleepwalkers.

Notes

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