

Lessons from World War I for the rise of Asia and their civilizations

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Abstract

Abstract: The current Korean crisis is just a prelude to the tensions and conflicts that will accompany the rise of the ancient civilizations which have a much longer tradition than the Western World. Globalization will inevitably lead to the newly rise of the civilizations which have lost their standing and recognition in the course of Western colonialism and hegemony. What we therefore need is a development of mutual recognition among the great civilizations of the earth, which should transcend a mere parallelism as well as a universal civilization which in the end would just be a kind of universalized Western civilization. While the task of the late 20th century was the avoidance of the self-destruction of the planet, the task of our century will be to manage the new rise of the ancient civilizations without falling in the Thucydides trap of a repetition of the First World War – only now in Asia. As the slain former prime minister of Israel highlighted: "You don't make peace with friends. You make it with very unsavory enemies." Mutual recognition of the civilizations of the earth has a double perspective: It allows solving conflicts on a rational basis and it is binding the conflict-parties to their own civilizational standards.

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The whole non-Western world has only one aim – to be recognized again as equal by the leading Western powers, in order to regain their former status as world powers and civilizations, which was lost in the process of European and American colonization or hegemony. The desire for recognition is the thriving force behind the economic and political rise of Asia. The same was true with respect to the conflict between established, rising and declining powers before World War I. Are there lessons to be learned from the devastating conduct and outcome of World War I for our times? Is there only one lesson to be learned – that you can learn nothing from history? Or are we doomed to repeat history if we don't learn anything from it? History will not repeat itself precisely, but wars repeatedly occur throughout history, even great wars. We are living in an age in which a war between the great powers is viewed as unlikely, because it seems to be in no one's interest, as the outcome of such a war would be so devastating that each party would do the utmost to avoid it. Rationality seems to dominate the assumptions and way of thinking in our times. But no

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war would have been waged if the losing side, or even both sides, would have known the outcome in advance.

Historical analogies are not just a subject of historians – they form our way of thinking to deal with conflicts of today. The most important problem for the political discourse of our times is whether an analogy to the pre-World War I area or that of the pre-World War II area is appropriate to deal with the current conflicts in the world. If we use concepts and strategies with the main aim to avoid a repetition of totalitarian or imperialist movements and states, which led to developments similar to those resulting in World War II, a realistic approach might be reasonable. This would mean rearmament, an arms race, deterrence, regime change and even war to avoid a new world war. But if the current situation resembles more the pre-World War I area, these strategies and policies to avoid a similar development leading to World War II would eventually lead to a repetition of World War I.

All reckonings regarding a repetition of World War I in Asia are based on the assumptions that it would be in no one's interest to fight a large scale war, even with WMD, which could lead to the destruction of great parts of Asia, Europe and North-America. But what if conflicts in Asia would not be fought to pursue national interests so much as recognition? What would this mean: to be accepted as equal again after the humiliation in the course of European colonization and subsequent American hegemony? Indeed, acknowledgment of past suffering seems to be a trauma in the conscience of many Asian nations. Are those desires only irrational or a different kind of rationality, which we have to take into account?

No one wanted World War I to happen. Or, at least, no one wanted the kind of war that actually took place. The general assumption was that the conflict would be very limited. The Europeans who went to war assumed they would be home by Christmas 1914. We know now, of course, that World War I not only happened but that it also resulted in the self-destruction of the European powers in two world wars. World War I is foremost a lesson that a limited conflict could escalate into a nightmare of millions of deaths and unspeakable suffering, for which no rational explanation could be found. Military aims and strategies gained priority above meaningful political purposes. Although the generals of the German empire believed that they were relying on Clausewitz's theory, in fact they perverted him. Tactics

replaced strategy, strategy substituted politics, politics gained momentum above policy, and policy was militarized. It was as if everybody was saying: being at war would mean a stop to thinking.

Perhaps the deepest and hidden reason for this escalation was that no party could admit neither defeat nor failure. A striking evidence for this assumption is that the proclaimed war aims of the German Empire got momentum the more they got unrealistic and irrational. The pride, honor and identity of the German Reich prohibited the acknowledgment of defeat and failure. This was the same with Russia, France, England and the Habsburg Empire – and the Turk Empire too. Perhaps especially these Empires knew that their rule wouldn't survive if they would have had to acknowledge military defeat or failure. Military defeat or failure would have humiliated their identity and their “face”: their social recognition within their society and community. A military defeat would signal their “symbolic death” – and so, the empires fought a war for life and death. This does not mean a simple equation of rising China with the then rising German Empire. Although the actors then and today seem to be quite different, the dynamics generated by the conflict between emerging, rising and declining powers are strikingly comparable.

Robert MacNamara, the US Secretary of State during the Cuban Missile Crisis, famously noted that it was sheer luck, not rationality, that prevented the escalation of this crisis into a world war. “I want to say, and this is very important: at the end we lucked out. It was luck that prevented nuclear war. We came that close to nuclear war at the end. Rational individuals: Kennedy was rational; Khrushchev was rational; Castro was rational. Rational individuals came that close to total destruction of their societies. And that danger exists today.” In 1983 the world did even need twice more than great fortune to avoid nuclear disaster. In current times all great powers are using military means to pursue their political and economic interests. But we just should not allow ourselves to bet in a casino-like style that military conflicts and strategies could not lead to the escalation of limited conflicts into great power wars.

There-politicization of war and globalization

Since the end of the East-West conflict, terms like risk society,

reflexive modernization, and globalization have been used in both academic and public debates as part of an intensifying discourse about how the accelerating transformation of social and national identities is affecting societies. Social, political, and economic developments devalue knowledge that has been handed down and traditional models of interpretation and give rise to a need for new perspectives.

Cultural and religious conceptions of order, in their special historical and contemporary contexts, were re-actualized for providing orientation to people in a dramatically changing world. As processes of change and transformations of their life-worlds affect people, they reconstruct and reorganize these conceptions of order so that they can comprehend and explain their changing world. In the way people build communities in order to defend and promote these different kinds of order, these aspirations become automatically political in essence. In a globalized world, these communities are becoming increasingly political, regardless of whether they exist for a long or short time or whether they seem to be determined by religion, culture, national aspirations, or a tribal background. The sole aspect of importance is that they are defending their identity and spreading their order and values as a community against or with others.

With these proposals, I do not want to draw into doubt some tendencies towards a privatization of war and violence in general (because they are appropriate for particular cases), but that current developments in the strategic environment display fundamentally conflicting tendencies: between globalization and struggles over identities, locational advantages, and interests; between high-tech wars and combat with "knives and machetes" or suicide bombers; between symmetrical and asymmetrical warfare. The conflict is also between the privatization of war and violence and their re-politicization and re-ideologization—conflicts over “world order”; between the formation of new regional power centers and the hegemonic dominance of the only superpower; between international organized crime and the institutionalization of regional and global institutions and communities; and between increasing violations of international law and human rights on one side and the expansion of international law and human rights on the other.

Liberal progress produces illiberal counter-reactions, and some political forces are pursuing a liberal order with elements that could be

regarded as essentially illiberal. But the main distinction is whether we fight disorder and privatized violence or whether different kinds of order are in a conflicting competition.

This conflict becomes most apparent not only in the way in which we ourselves conceive the concept of victory, but even more importantly in which ways, for example, low-tech adversaries define victory and defeat. This is an exercise that requires cultural and historical knowledge about their political order much more than it does gee-whiz technology.

Robert Kaplan argued that the rules of war could only be applied against enemies with which we share a similar cultural background or at least a similar concept of rationality, but that the rules of the jungle must be applied to survive new wars. This is fundamentally wrong because outside the "developed world," there is not one single jungle in which the Hobbesian war of all against all is the predominant kind of conflict. However, there are also extensive areas of the world in which violent conflicts about political, cultural, social, and even religious order are emerging. In the long run, these kinds of conflict will be prevalent. Robert Kagan argued that Europeans are from Venus, enjoying peace, whereas the US-Americans are from Mars and have to secure this peace by power-politics and even by force. But he admitted that this was not always the case and argued that until the beginning of World War I and Woodrow Wilson's presidency, these roles were reversed. But if this was the case, the paramount question remains: to which results for the European powers did their pure power politics before World War I lead? Nothing other than the self-destruction of Europe in World War I.

Conflicts about different kinds of order

After the collapse of the global system of order in the Cold War, most conflicts initially revolved around the contrast between order and disorder (as symbolized by concepts such as privatized violence, low-intensity conflict, and failed states). Since 1996, when the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan, different conceptions of order were at stake.

The German sociologist Max Weber emphasized that an order maintained for goal-oriented interests is much less stable than one that is respected "as a matter of custom arising from a settled behavioral

orientation." This kind of order, however, is much less stable than "one which enjoys the prestige that follows from being seen as exemplary or binding; let us call this 'legitimacy.'" It is very nearly possible to synchronize Max Weber's classification of the different levels of stability of different orders, resting on interests, custom, or legitimacy, with the previous developments in warfare starting with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Immediately after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, wars related to private enrichment and the pursuit of interests were most visible. These were then gradually replaced by conflicts involving ethnic groups, the formation of small states, and national minorities. Finally, they were replaced by concepts of "world order" such as Islamism, which doesn't contribute to individual interests or ethnic rivalries.

Huntington's emphasis on cultural and civilizational conflicts between different conceptions of order captured one important aspect of ongoing developments, but he too mechanically treated these conflicts as taking place between civilizations, when in fact they are just as prevalent within civilizations, if not more so. But he was right in assuming that future conflicts are shaped by those conflicts concerning local, regional, or even world order, regardless of whether this particular kind of order is more related to culture or religion or "civilization."

These simultaneous processes of disintegration and reconstruction of order within communities are in (often violent) conflict with those between many communities, as well as with the overall tendencies grounded in geopolitics and globalization. The key problem here is not the value we attach to our own conception of order, but the fact that the conflict dynamic obeys rules that differ from those operating in a paradigm where conceptions of order and anarchy confront each other directly.

Globalization

It is obvious in my view that globalization is intensifying conflicts over world order, which leads to the return of geopolitics of different great and even global powers. The main task, therefore, is to avoid the escalation of conflicts between old and new global powers (most of the latter are old empires, striving for their renewed recognition as

world powers, which they have lost in the process of colonization) and to avoid an arms race that could eventually lead to new traditional wars, considering the unstable situation most noticeable in states like Pakistan and Ukraine, but possibly also in former empires such as India, China, and Russia.

Politics must not be reduced to power politics within or between states. The negative effect of one-sided power politics could be observed in the developments that led to World War I and in our times can be observed in the Israel-Palestinian conflict as well as in conflicts in failed states like Syria, Ukraine, Libya, and Egypt. Although the relation of policy and war as Clausewitz describes it did not change substantially, a globalized world does need a concept of policy and politics that fits the ongoing process of globalization. Clausewitz wrote: "It can be taken as agreed that the aim of policy is to unify and reconcile all aspects of internal administration as well as of spiritual values, and whatever else the moral philosopher may care to add. Policy, of course, is nothing in itself; it is simply the trustee for all these interests" - not against other states, as Clausewitz wrote in his time, but against the worldwide expansion of war and violent action within and between states.

In the past 25 years, we have witnessed expectations of revolution in military affairs (RMA) and the appearance of seemingly new kinds of warfare, the so-called new wars. The RMA promised to present, to a serious extent, technological solutions for political conflicts. Warfare and "military operations other than war" seemed to be legitimate if they were easily won. The costs would remain limited and the adversary could be presented as an outlaw of the international community, in a classical view, as a dictator or warlord who would have no support from the majority of the populace. All three propositions proved fatally wrong in Afghanistan and Iraq. For a short period, this understanding of the current battle space was revived in the campaign against Libya and the interpretation of the Arab Spring through Western eyes, which are used to view communities as being composed of individuals whereas in most parts of the world society is composed as a "community of communities." This is more important as more technical opportunities are expected in 21st century warfare. To put it bluntly: the evolving battle space of the 21st century is about ethics and the morality of using force—its legitimacy. The more

technical opportunities in warfare we develop, the more the morality of its use comes to the fore.

Hegel's notion about the importance of the struggle for recognition leads to the conclusion that intercultural communication is not only necessary with respect to relations between Europe and Asia, but perhaps even more important within Asia. A world war starting in Asia would not be about interests, but rather would be a cultural war for mutual recognition. Only intercultural communication and strong multilateral institutions are capable of avoiding the nightmare of a great power war in Asia, which would lead to a repetition of 1914. Globalization poses the same problem for modern warfare as the French Revolution and Napoleonic warfare did for the theory of war in their times. The eminent Chinese scholar Zhang Wei Wei has argued that the world is at a watershed for the transformation of a hierarchically structured international system to a more symmetrical one. Nevertheless, this proposition does not only have serious implications for the US, but also for China, India, and Russia. Based on Hegel's proposition of the "progress in the consciousness of freedom" and Zhang Wei Wei's observation, it could be said that we are at a watershed in world history: the transformation of merely hierarchical societal relations into more symmetrical ones between and within societies by ensuring the progress in the consciousness of freedom as well as the human right of equality.

There are many structural similarities between the pre-1914 period in Europe and the current conflicts in Asia. History will not repeat exactly. But the resemblance is striking. There are good precautionary warnings from the comparison. Nevertheless the task is not to discuss whether similarities or differences count for more. The real task is already to take precautionary steps in order to ensure that there will be no World War in Asia. Here Cold War efforts to avoid military conflict between the superpowers (such as the "hotlines" between Washington and Moscow) could be applied meaningful to the current conflicts in Asia. As it stands, the lack of multilateral institutions – like those created in Europe after 1945 – to settle the disputes in Asia is in itself dangerous.

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the world is on a watershed of the transformation of a hierarchical structured international system to a more symmetrical one. Nevertheless this proposition does not imply only for the US, as he sees it, but for China, India and Russia, too. If there is any progress in history in the long run (here I'm following in the footsteps of Hegel) it is the transformation of mere hierarchical societal relations in more symmetrical ones between and within societies – a floating balance and harmony between the West and the East, between symmetrical and hierarchical relations is needed.

Thomas Hobbes once famously noted that the natural stage of mankind is not peace, but the war of all against all. We should not delude ourselves with the assumption that peace is the natural stage of mankind in our age. The late Yitzhak Rabin made the proposition: "You don't make peace with friends. You make it with very unsavory enemies." Carl Schmitt believed that the essence of politics is the differentiation of friends and enemy. In my interpretation of Hannah Arendt and Carl Schmitt, both should be understood as follows: the differentiation of friends and foes is the initial proposition of politics, but it's final aim is the mediation of friends and foes, to find a common ground *between* these antagonistic contrasts without eliminating the competition (this concept stems from Plato, Eric Voegelin and Hannah Arendt). This might be the most important lesson we should learn from history