

Historians compare the onset of World War I exactly a century ago with our own time. At the turn of the 19th century, the world was undergoing extraordinary globalization. The British Empire ruled the seas and conquered and colonized territories too backward and stagnant to protect themselves. The British introduced the concepts of the nation state to India, which had never really been a continent-wide country before. They introduced railroads, uniform law and order, and a unifying language that enabled people with a multitude of tongues to communicate.

In the western world, inventions and innovations improved life for millions of people, creating large, educated middle classes. The insecurity and turmoil of the 18th century, with its revolutions, anarchists, and vast flight of people from the world's backwaters, had settled down. There had been no major wars in Europe since Napoleon's defeat in 1812, nor in America since the Civil War's end in 1864. Optimism was the flavor of the day---until 1914, when everything changed.

Much today resembles that period, except the US has replaced Britain. We won World Wars I, II, and the Cold War. Our Navy rules the seas and our Air Force rules the skies. Former colonies have been freed to become nation states. Every effort has been made to establish Democracy in these new states, and it is only now that we see how difficult that is. It is easier to hold an election than to plant a liberal democracy in fanatically religious and largely ignorant countries. Their cultures and practices conflict with the requirements of a modern, free state.

In the 1990s, Historians such as Francis Fukuyama were writing about \223The End of History\224 because there were no major wars on the horizon----until 9/11 woke us up. The World Order is only as secure as the US can make it---but at the moment, the public is in no mood to intervene in any more Third World chaos. Some, fed up with the Iraq and Afghan wars, are asking why we can't give the world a little tough love and quit solving other countries' messes. However, if we give up our global leadership, who else might take it on---and would we like such a world? Europe is no longer in a position of leadership and, without us, couldn't even stop genocide in the disintegrating Yugoslavia. Europe is weak toward the newly resurgent and scary Russia; only we can take them on, as President Obama quietly did.

The Middle East has exploded into a fever of revolt against long-time dictatorships, only to result in civil wars and the possibility of even worse Islamic dictatorships. This is what happens when the US mistakes the \223Arab Spring\224 for a democratic movement. Because we still need oil, we have to play global big daddy there for some time to come.

Barbara Tuchman's much admired *Guns of August* attributed the outbreak of World War I to a confluence of perception, misperception, personalities, and miscalculations; in other words, the accident of bad luck. George Friedman (STRATFOR) takes a different view.

When looked at from the vantage point of geopolitics: where countries are and who are their neighbors, a different picture emerges. He sees a certain inevitability of conflict twice, and almost three times in the 20th century, over the need to prevent the Eurasian continent from falling under a single rule. The Germans, Russians, and Franco-British have long been in this struggle. Both WWI and II stopped the Germans from becoming the world hegemon (same for Japan in the East). The Cold War stopped Russia from being that sole hegemon.

The Russians think they need buffers from the West as protection from the US as sole hegemon. This is what the Ukraine conflict is all about. Russia sees a threat from the West, as we do from Russia. This looks more like 1914 than just crossed perceptions.

At this moment in history, the trick is to be smart enough to use all of our tools, not just the big fist. Use the fist only when we must.

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