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Slide back towards war

by GWYNNE DYER

We seem to be drifting back into the world of ?Might Makes Right'. That would be a bad place to be.

Last June the president of Rwanda, Paul Kagame, said that he was ready to go to war with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRCongo) if necessary. He still hasn't formally declared war, but 3,000-4,000 Rwandan troops are already across the DRCongo border and many more are just behind them.

When Donald Trump first broached the notion of acquiring Greenland in 2019, he called it ?essentially a large real estate deal.? Now he says that he won't rule out using military force to gain control of the vast territory, which is part of Denmark but free to leave if its people (mostly indigenous Inuit) wish to.

I know, you're saying to yourself that this is a ridiculous comparison. The two potential victims are completely different: the DRCongo is a poor tropical country with more than 100 million people, while Greenland is a prosperous Arctic country with only 52,000 citizens and Denmark is a member of NATO and the European Union.

There's an equally huge disparity between the two potential aggressors. Rwanda is a heavily armed and militaristic country of 14 million people, sort of a big Sparta, while the United States is...well, it's a heavily armed and rather militaristic country of 341 million people. So kind of a gigantic Sparta, but with a more relaxed moral tone.

Nevertheless, it is fair to judge them by the same rules, for they are all sovereign states and have all signed the UN Charter. Article Two states clearly: ?All Members shall settle their international disputes by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security, and justice, are not endangered.?

That means they have promised not to settle their disputes by war ? and the African pair, Rwanda and the DRC, also signed the Charter of the African Union, which requires the member states to respect the borders ?existing on achievement of independence.?

In other words, they agreed never to change or challenge the old colonial borders, however irrational they may seem in ethnic or historical terms. Otherwise, African countries would face generations of interstate wars as various countries tried to achieve more ?convenient' borders.

And amazingly, it worked, more or less. These rules have for the most part been obeyed for more than two generations. There have been many internal wars but few cross-border wars, and even those rarely result in border changes. Moreover, in the few cases where borders are changed by force, other countries do not recognize the changes as legitimate.

This remarkable turn towards peace and justice, which has seen deaths in the world's wars fall from a million a month in 1942-1945 to tens of thousands a year by 2020, was driven mostly by the fear of nuclear war.

The great powers did not dare fight each other directly because they would be destroyed by nuclear weapons. They also tried to damp down other, lesser wars because they worried about escalation, and most other countries were glad to have an excuse to stop. The period between 1950 and 2020 was probably the most peaceful in the history of civilization.

The new rules made sense in the circumstances, so people behaved accordingly. Indeed, after the Cold War I could go into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moscow and get approximately the same lecture about the need to obey the rules that I would receive in the State Department in Washington.

The worry is that the generations turn over and gradually the old lessons are forgotten. Vladimir Putin probably knew the rules once,

but he doesn't think they matter any more. Donald Trump has probably never heard of them. They both think you can just grab some territory and get away with it, like you could in the 1600s or the 1800s.

They are wrong. Actions have consequences, and in the current era everything connects. Putin thought he could conquer Ukraine in a week, and next month will mark three years of war. Trump really could seize Greenland in a week, but the blowback from everywhere else would be hugely damaging and long-lasting.

As for Paul Kagame, he really should know better. This is the third time in the past 30 years that he has sent his troops (or Tutsi militants like the current M23 militia) into DRCongo to seize the north-east region's rich mineral resources. Twice the African Union has come up with enough forces to push him out, and it might yet manage it again.

So it's not over yet. The erosion of the post-1945 international rules is real and alarming, but so far, enough people still remember why we made them in the first place.