

The threat of global war

by GWYNNE DYER

A consensus has emerged, at least in Western media, that we are on the brink of a real war with the gloves off, maybe even a 'world war'.

The Russian dictator Vladimir Putin will overrun the rest of Europe as soon as he is finished with Ukraine. Donald Trump will invade Cuba even before he has finished with Iran. Israel will annex southern Lebanon, having driven out its population. China will invade Taiwan. Then someone will go nuclear, and we are off to the (final) races. Or so they say.

The first question to ask is why would they? There's no major economic or strategic advantage to be gained by conquering Ukraine: Russia is an oil state and it certainly doesn't need more land. Putin's real motive in trying to conquer Ukraine is clearly to seal his status (in his own head, at least) as Russia's greatest ever patriot. It is his legacy project.

In the unlikely case that Russia does conquer Ukraine ? four years and no success so far ? Putin would face a terrified and rapidly rearming European Union that has three times Russia's population and ten times its wealth, even while half his army would still be committed to holding down a popular resistance movement in occupied Ukraine.

And yet he's going to conquer all of Europe?

Nonsense. Russian generals let Putin have his war in 2022 because they were afraid of him, and because he promised that it would be over in less than a week with no serious response from the West. They're still afraid of him, but they wouldn't let him take them down that road again ? and even if they did, Russia can't conquer all of Central and Western Europe.

Even Napoleon or Hitler at their height couldn't do that, and those were times when the offensive was in the ascendant. Now it's defence that dominates, and even Finland could probably hold the Russians off for half a year

The other country that is already starting wars, the United States, is run by a man who attacks countries almost on a whim, but he crumbles at the sign of serious resistance (TACO). We're currently watching the psychodrama as he struggles to deny defeat in the Persian Gulf.

Some countries in Latin America, some in the Middle East, and Canada and Greenland may be in danger of a US take-over, but it wouldn't be a world war if Trump attacked another one of them, just a local tragedy.

Much the same can be about Israel, apart from fact that it is much more serious and systematic about ruthlessly eliminating all its enemies (and to hell with the bystanders.) Israel also has hundreds of nuclear weapons, but it wouldn't use them unless Israel were facing defeat in a war that threatens its existence ? which seems highly unlikely at the moment.

As for China's frequently expressed will to 'reunify' Taiwan to the mainland by force if necessary, there is no deadline. The island has only been governed by Beijing for four of the past 150 years, and it is a very hard place to invade.

President Trump is currently ratting on America's long-standing implied promise to defend Taiwan from attack by China, but it was never a solid commitment. If the Taiwanese are willing to pay for serious defenses they can probably deter Beijing from invading by themselves for a long time; if not, they will eventually be blockaded and absorbed.

Quite a menu of risks, but in fact it is no longer than the list of threats the world faced in 1962 or 1987 or 2008 or indeed any other year of the past eighty. As former US president Calvin Coolidge observed a hundred years ago: 'If you see ten troubles coming down the road, you can be sure that nine will run into the ditch before they reach you.'

Once in a while, of course, the tenth will get through, and it might even kill you. There is no permanent safety. Why not?

Our ancestors for 300,000 years were all hunter-gatherers who lived in small groups (rarely more than a hundred people) and were frequently at war with the other hunter-gatherer groups around them. Constant warfare shaped their ideas and their behaviour, and it still has a profound influence although we now live in societies millions strong.

Human beings had to change many of their behaviours as they built their new 'civilizations', but they didn't change their attitudes about war because it was still profitable for those societies that were good at it. That ceased to be true around the time of the First World War, and ever since we have been collectively striving to dismantle the old beliefs and structures.

It has only been one century, so I'd say that we're making fairly good progress.