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“The Waning of the Post-War Order”¹

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Making sense of the present is a difficult undertaking at the best of times. It seems more especially so at the current moment. The tumult of 2016 was of a kind not seen since the ‘spring of the peoples’ in 1848. Power no longer seems to be what it was and where it was thought to be. In the West, a wave of anti-establishment populism threatens to bring down the given order, and, in part, has succeeded in upending established verities. Elsewhere, the world seems in turmoil, too. Migratory movements along Europe’s soft Mediterranean underbelly are placing unprecedented strains on European societies and the continent’s political structures; a restless Russia is intent on a policy of imperial reconstitution, however partial; in East Asia, the rising power of China and a defensive United States are eying each other warily; and Islamist terrorism continues to widen the internal and geopolitical fault lines of the Middle East and to export violence abroad. The speed and spread of change has left commentators perplexed at how what, until very recently, appeared firm and unshakeable has proved brittle and shallow-rooted. Some see Western democracy imperilled and point to parallels with the 1930s. Others draw analogies with the inquietude of Europe on the eve of the First World War. Whether any such parallels exist today, we shall know for certain in a hundred years’ time. Perceived analogies are never exact. Often, indeed, they are misleading, and reveal more about contemporary sensibilities than about ‘objective’ realities. But rather than look back wistfully at the simpler times of the post-1945 world, it is worth remembering that instability and impermanence are the hallmark of international affairs. They are, as German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck once observed, “a fluid element, which will coagulate temporarily under certain circumstances but which, at a change in the atmosphere, will revert to its original aggregate condition.”²

¹ This essay was written in early January 2017.

² Otto von Bismarck, *Gedanken und Erinnerungen*, 2 vols. (Stuttgart and Berlin, popular edition, 1913), vol. ii, 287. He made the observation with reference to alliance diplomacy, but it holds true of international politics in general.

Drawing parallels always contains the risk of short-circuiting more complex connections. Yet a single event may have a 'flash bulb' effect, briefly and sharply illuminating the emerging contours of the new that would otherwise lie in the semi-dark of the present. Donald Trump's election may be such a moment. His pronouncements, shot through with inconsistencies and improbabilities as they are, his professed penchant for bilateral 'deal'-making, the manner of his election, the unusual process of transition to his presidency and its no less peculiar commencement have led many observers to suggest that the fundamental assumptions about United States foreign policy, indeed the whole architecture of Western security and the wider international system, have been called into question: "The United States is, for now, out of the world order business."³

Whether such forebodings are justified, only time will tell. But the pervasive sense that 2016-2017 is a turning point invites reflection on the nature of change in general. It might be more productive to step back to seek a longer perspective on the tide of international affairs. To get a clearer sense of what the glare of the 2016 flashlight reveals, the focus on the short twentieth century, so prevalent in much of current commentary, will not suffice. This, indeed, is a good moment to reflect on post-war eras in a historical perspective.

The history of international relations is punctured by wars and subsequent post-conflict settlements. One of the chief characteristics of modern history, indeed, is the attempt to establish a lasting peace settlement after the last great war so that it really would end war. But whatever lofty ideals it expresses, the termination of any war, the manner of it and its substantive arrangements, reflects the power relationships of that moment. It crystallizes and preserves them. It reorders hierarchies and regulates, often in considerable detail, future relations between the victorious and the vanquished. The more far-sighted settlements were those that did not exclude the defeated powers, but offered them the prospect of eventual redemption and reintegration. And they tended to be the more durable ones. None of them, however, has proved permanent. At some point, all post-war periods have come to a close. No new order, whether regional or indeed global, has survived for longer than several decades. Power, after all, is the amorphous essence of politics, and conflict is inherent in history. Ultimately, its destructive potential overwhelms all efforts to tame or contain it through rules-based structures. The challenge is to prevent their complete destruction.

The generational rhythm of history ensures that international settlements eventually begin to wane. As those present at the creation of a new order, the peace-makers and their advisers, depart from the scene, they are succeeded by those destined to administer the settlement and adapt it to changing circumstances. When they fade away, too, new ideas and ideological forces emerge and new material conditions mature that will eventually undermine the now old order.

The peace treaties of Münster and Osnabrück of 1648 are usually seen as the beginning of the modern states system. They affirmed the equality and sovereignty of states. The complex set of rules, enshrined in the Westphalian peace, and the arbitration mechanisms it established more especially for the Holy Roman Empire prevented another bout of religious wars in Central Europe. But it did not secure general peace. The French struggle with the declining hegemonic power of Spain continued for another decade, and eventually

³ Robert Kagan, "An end to the indispensable nation," *Financial Times*, 21 November 2016.

reversed the traditional power relations between the two. The rise of France brought war to the Western fringes of the Empire and to the Low Countries more especially, and it enabled the last Ottoman push towards Central Europe in 1683. It also accelerated the decline of Sweden from the dominant force in the Baltic to a regional satellite of the court at Versailles. The Swedish retreat in the North and the repeated checks to Turkish power from the 1680s onwards, meanwhile, fuelled the ascent of Russia in the East. The War of the Spanish Succession after the death of the last Habsburg at Madrid confirmed the terminal decline of Spain, as it did the rise of Great Britain and Austria. The Peace Treaty of Utrecht sanctioned British maritime dominance, that of Rastatt transferred Habsburg rule in Brussels to the Viennese branch of the dynasty. The two treaties also established the outlines of some sort of containment of France. Anglo-Austrian disunity and the tenuous position of the Emperor in Germany and Italy, however, meant that the settlement of 1713-1714 was not stable, let alone durable.

The search for alternatives eventually produced the ‘Diplomatic Revolution,’ that seemingly so impossible historic compromise between the Bourbons and the Habsburgs. Yet it, too, paved the way for the next great war, the Seven Years’ War, the eighteenth century’s world war, fought simultaneously in the Ohio Valley, on the banks of the St. Lawrence, the North German plain, the rolling hills of Bohemia, and in Bengal. Its conclusion in the treaties of Hubertusburg and Paris of 1763 confirmed the new realities. But the new settlement, too, contained within it the seeds of its own demise: the global rivalry between Britain and France, in which the former held the advantage for now; the Austro-Prussian dualism in Central Europe; and the ill-concealed Austro-French suspicions, which even the matrimonial sacrifice of Marie Antoinette could not remove. The Anglo-French antagonism provided the framework for the escalation of Britain’s little local difficulty in North America into a full-blown war with France, Spain, and the Netherlands. The two German powers went to war one more time, even if they exhausted themselves in manoeuvring so as to avoid battle; and by then the Bourbon-Habsburg alliance was unravelling, too.

If the peace settlements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were less than durable, the quarter of a century of revolutionary turmoil and well-nigh uninterrupted war before 1815 impressed on the architects of the post-Napoleonic peace settlement the vital importance of creating an order that would last. As Viscount Castlereagh observed at the time, it was “not our business to collect trophies [from France], but to try to bring the world back to peaceful habits.”⁴ Historians will continue to debate the longevity of the Vienna settlement. Some of its essential features, not least the ‘Concert of Europe’ mechanism, remained in place until 1914, battered and bruised though it was by then. The post-Napoleonic period came to an end with the Crimean War. Until then, the Great Powers had kept the peace. Now, the unwholesome combination of Anglo-Russian blundering and revisionist needling by France might easily have escalated the conflict. That it did not owed much to Austria’s dithering and maladroit diplomacy and Prussia’s cussedness. For once, ineptitude preserved the general peace. The Crimean settlement, however, soon disintegrated. Britain and Russia, the two erstwhile *status quo*-powers withdrew from active involvement in European affairs and left it to Austria to maintain the 1815 order, a task that lay beyond its capabilities. The new order opened the floodgates to French and other revisionism. During the post-Crimean trough in international politics the Ottoman Empire began to crumble along its edges. The Italian and German nation states were forged in wars; and in the wake of the Franco-German War Russia was able to abrogate the clauses of the 1856 Crimean peace treaty that

⁴As quoted in C.J. Bartlett, *Castlereagh* (London, 1966), 156.

provided for the demilitarization of the Black Sea and so broke down the ring of containment laid around it in 1856.

Six years later, Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli's brinkmanship, Russian exhaustion, and Bismarck's wire-pulling prevented another Great Power war in the Near East. The Anglo-Russian struggle for mastery in Asia made such a war always a likely prospect. That it did not materialise after all owed much to Russia's external and internal weakness following the Russo-Turkish and above all the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905. The latter was a regional conflict with global ramifications. It left Russia in a position of abject, if temporary, weakness, and so paved the way for an Anglo-Russian grand bargain in Asia. But that same weakness also set Europe on a collision course. If none of the decision-makers in the summer of 1914 desired a general war, collectively they had lost that sense of the 'tragic,' of the fragility of all human achievement, and of peace and order in particular. And so ninety-nine years of peace came to an end, and the self-destruction of Europe as the powerhouse of world politics began.

That war was, in George F. Kennan's oft-quoted comment, the "seminal catastrophe" of Europe.⁵ The Paris peace settlement, really the outcome of inter-Allied negotiations, was a 'lost peace,' not only because of America's desertion but also because of its arrangements. The fundamental problem of post-1919 European politics was the question of security. As Viscount Grey, who as Foreign Minister had taken Britain into war in 1914, observed nine years later, it was of vital importance "to give security to France and to Germany also in the future. Our own security is bound up with French security, and I believe only by some big scheme that makes Germany feel secure as well as France will you bring about that feeling of security."⁶ Security remained elusive, and so the incomplete peace of 1919-1925 prepared, in part, the ground for the next world war. 1919 left behind also a number of running sores, not least in the Middle East, sores that have not healed up since and are not likely to do so anytime soon.

By contrast, the new world order that emerged, in fits and starts, after 1945 proved more stable and durable—in a longer perspective remarkably so. No doubt, the bipolar confrontation, more or less entrenched since 1953, made maintaining the Cold War system easier. True, as recent historical scholarship has shown⁷, crises such as those over Berlin or, more so, that over Soviet missiles on Cuba brought the two superpowers closer to war than was realized at the time. Yet the bipolar order, and the 'rules of the game' underpinning it, remained stable enough so that even the 'Second Cold War' of the 1980s, feeding on discontent with the *détente* of the previous decade, could not shake the relative stability of the twentieth century's second post-war order.

Its eventual collapse in 1989/91 thus also marked the end of the short twentieth century. What followed was a moment self-delusion. A 'unipolar' order appeared to have arrived, and it seemed safe now to proclaim the 'end of history.' One of the two empires that had vied for dominance for nearly five decades had prevailed

⁵ George F. Kennan, *The Decline of Bismarck's European Order: Franco-Russian Relations 1875-1890* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

⁶ *Hansard (Lords)* liii (20 April 1923), col. 807.

⁷ See the reflections offered by John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); and, for a case study, the essays in Len Scott and R. Gerald Hughes (eds.), *The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Critical Reappraisal* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015).

without the bloody wars that accompanied the rise and fall of earlier empires. That in itself was remarkable enough. Western values had triumphed and the world was at last safe for democracy.

It did not last. The ‘unipolar’ moment disappeared before too long. America is no longer the *hyperpuissance* of the 1990s, and so the euphoria at having thrown off the shackles of history has evaporated. The past decade-and-a-half has witnessed a transition, gradual at first but steadily accelerating, to a new era, marked by heightened tensions and new forms of war-like conflicts in a more fragmented world. What is unusual, though by no means unique, about the current situation is that, for now, the organizational forms and power constellations of the old order remain in place. Their continued validity, however, is being challenged. The old structures are still alive, while new ones are struggling to break through their crust.

Some of the outlines of that new order can be discerned. There is, in the first instance, the rise of China, the pace and scope of which were predicted by few at the end of the Cold War. By any standard, China’s material progress since the early 1990s has been extraordinary (though it merely restores it to the economic position lost around 1800), and it changes the dynamics of international politics. Certainly, Beijing is conscious of its growing global power and is insistent on recognition of that fact. So far, sporadic and ultimately short-lived rhetoric about a strategic partnership notwithstanding, U.S. policy has continued to pursue a strategy of containing the further spread of China’s influence in the Asia-Pacific area and beyond through regional alliances and selective engagement with Beijing. Emerging commercial empires tend to guard their trade routes jealously and feel easily threatened. China is no different, as the establishment of its first overseas base at Djibouti, its ‘island-building’ in the South China Seas and its now more sophisticated geopolitical courting of the smaller South East Asian countries show. Time will tell whether Donald Trump will indeed tear up the rule book of Sino-American relations, abdicate America’s leadership role implicit in the now defunct Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, and so abandon the ‘pivot to Asia’. But China’s growing influence will shape the new epoch.

There is an ironic twist to the situation in 2016-2017. Classic geopolitical theory suggests that in a collision between a *status quo* power and an emerging challenger, the latter represents the destabilizing force.⁸ In electing Donald Trump the American electorate may unwittingly have sent someone to the Oval Office who, whether out of calculation or ignorance or indeed indifference, seems intent on reversing these traditional roles. His elevation may have pushed open the door to a new Cold War-style confrontation in which America’s hand is not very strong.

Quite possibly, Trump’s moves so far are more a case of chaotic *ad hoc* improvisation rather than the fruits of strategic cerebration. The same cannot be said of Chinese policy. Beijing seems ready to fill any vacuum left by the United States. President Xi Jinping’s speech at Davos in January 2017, in which he sought to position

⁸ See for instance Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988); more pointedly also Graham T. Allison, *Destined for War: America, China and the Thucydides Trap* (forthcoming Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017); for alternative views see the essays in Richard N. Rosecrance and Steven E. Miller, eds., *The Next Great War?: The Roots of World War I and the Risk of U.S.-China Conflict* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015).

his country as the core leader of the globalized world, underlined this.⁹ And no doubt, Beijing will test the new man in the White House early into his presidency, just it tested George W. Bush when it forced a U.S. surveillance plane to land on Hainan. But China will be the constant point of reference as the new order emerges and settles into its own structures, and Sino-American relations will be the most critical for peace and stability in the world.

Another source of current and likely future instability is Russia. To an extent, this means dealing with the delayed aftershocks of the implosion of the Soviet empire, whose dismantling the Russian President has repeatedly decried as “a major geopolitical disaster of the century.”¹⁰ Vladimir Putin’s sense of grievance is a strong motivation behind his foreign policy. The demographic, economic, and technological foundations of Russia’s power may be brittle, but reasserting Moscow’s influence in the ‘near abroad,’ the incursions into the Eastern Ukraine, and the annexation of the Crimea are part of a policy of imperial restoration, buttressed by a sustained and by no means unsuccessful disinformation and destabilization campaign targeted at Western Europe and North America. Combined with the ongoing build-up of Russian arms, Moscow is on the point of entrenching ‘escalation dominance.’ Russia’s weaknesses, her crony capitalism and managed clientelism masquerading as democracy, do not lend themselves to long-term economic and geopolitical planning. But Russia’s mercurial leader is an opportunist who will continue to probe the West’s perceived frailties.

A more disparate, often diffuse, and hence more difficult challenge is posed by the rise of Islamist ideologies. In its most recent and most violent incarnation in *Daesh* it lays claim to some form of statehood. Yet it is less susceptible to classic strategic or geopolitical analysis. Its spread across North Africa and the Middle East and into South East Asia, however, has had a destabilizing effect on the regimes of those regions and the external Powers supporting them. It has also sought to obliterate the frontiers drawn towards the end of the First World War in a life and death struggle between the sects and tribes of the region; and this battleground has furnished the base from which Islamist terrorism reaches every corner of the globe. Its violent progress poses a danger to Western interests and security, but it is not an existential threat. In recent years it has, however, revealed the limitations of Washington’s willingness once more overtly to interfere in the Middle East, and has thus helped to entrench a view that America is in retreat. At the same time, the stream of refugees fleeing the collapse of old state structures there and Islamist-inspired terrorist attacks put pressure on European security and social stability. The Islamist threat is not likely to last in its current manifestation. Eventually, it will consume itself, only to spew out a further mutation. The violence endemic in the Arab world and the interests of various regional players, more especially Iran and Saudi Arabia, but also Russia and Turkey, will keep this region a source of instability.

These developments have a bearing on Europe. Here, too, existing structures are under immense strain. At the end of the Cold War, the continent emerged democratic, peaceful, prosperous, and united. Now, a series of interlocking economic, institutional and geopolitical crises threatens to undermine Europe’s economy and the cohesion of the European Union. Identity politics and rising nationalisms pose a possibly existential challenge to the EU. Populist movements of the left and right, fattened alike on a surfeit of popular disaffection with

⁹ Xi Jinping speech at World Economic Forum, Davos, 17 January 2017, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/01/full-text-of-xi-jinping-keynote-at-the-world-economic-forum>.

¹⁰ Putin annual address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, 25 April 2005, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>.

post-2008 austerity and elite complacency, are on the rise. In many European countries domestic politics have fragmented, and make impossible now the smooth alternating of governments of the centre-right and centre-left that had characterized the post-war period. Governments have lost control, and citizens have lost confidence in their governments. In Eastern Europe, the ‘awkward quartet’ of the Visegrad Four is openly hostile to EU pluralism and increasingly emboldened to push for its own authoritarian version of European values.

In the face of such challenges, the European integration project, the foundation of trans-Atlantic strategy since the Marshall Plan, is fragmenting. A weaker, more divided Europe will be a source of instability. If and when Britain leaves the EU, the bloc will have lost its second largest economy and its strongest military power. At the moment, neither London nor Brussels has a constructive plan how to terminate Britain’s 44-years of membership of the European club. If anything, the signs are that an orderly disentangling is unlikely, and that the talks will result in a ‘messy Brexit.’ Britain does not have the capacity for the negotiations, and the EU lacks the necessary focus. Recurring debt crises in Southern Europe will put further strain on the internal cohesion of institutionalized Europe, while the refugee crisis has overwhelmed its ability to assimilate the incomers. Declining popular support for the concept of ‘ever closer union’ leaves the EU vulnerable to populist assaults on its liberal and democratic foundations and exposed to aggressive probing by Russia.

It remains to be seen how Europe will respond to these challenges, but it is doubtful that its current preference for bureaucratic solutions will give the continent a clearer strategic identity.

The future direction of European politics will to no small degree depend on what happens next in America. There is a profound paradox about the present position. It is characterized by an opportunity inherent in it and the likelihood of its being spurned by President Trump. Western politics since 1945 were underpinned by assumptions about the indispensability of the United States. Washington’s apparent retreat over the last eight years has reminded the rest of the world of America’s importance. This presents the incoming administration with an opportunity to coax others into renewing cooperation on America’s terms. However, it seems unlikely that this will happen. The new President’s public pronouncements to date appear to be based on a narrow reading of America’s national interest and are infused with a belligerent unilateralism. He has called into question the U.S. commitment to NATO and to the security of East Asia. Even if the existing alliances will not be renounced, they are likely to be readjusted to new realities. Conceivably, provocative pronouncements may be an opening gambit in Trump’s much vaunted ‘deal’-making approach, itself more instinctual than reasoned. If so, he is likely to fail in his objectives. History is littered with the political corpses of businessmen who sought to bring their entrepreneurial flair—often real—and insights—mostly imagined—to the art of politics. Business deals pursue one object at a time; foreign policy needs to keep several in view at all times. It never stops. It is an unending process, and success mostly elusive, determined not so much by one single move as by its overall, long-term coherence. America’s acquiescence into Beijing so-called ‘One China Policy’ is a case in point. Its success so far lies in the circumstance that the question of Taiwan’s position has not been solved, but that it has gained both sides that most precious political commodity, time, to let the matter evolve, without threatening their relationship. Pursuing short-term gains here may well have to be purchased at the price of considerable strategic loss.

American isolation in the early twentieth century lasted for two decades. Just as then, the American people will eventually rediscover that their country cannot simply withdraw from international politics, that there is no escape. But, as then, the question is how much damage will be done in the meantime. America will be able to cope with it. Its allies and partners may well not be able to do so.

The post-Cold War period is coming to an end, and with it the larger post-war era is drawing to a close. The order established in 1945 is fragmenting, and the process of its disintegration is accelerating. The Brexit-vote and the election of Donald Trump are symptoms of this process of decay; they are not its causes. But both have the potential—the ascension of the new and unlikely President more than the fractious future of a small European island—of letting history spin out of control. The old order has not yet collapsed, but international politics are in the process of reverting to their original fluid condition. Global stability will depend on whether that process can be slowed and whether some of the older structures can be preserved before the atmospheric changes, of which Bismarck spoke, dissolve them completely.

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