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From Cold War to Hot Peace



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WITH the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we are entering a new phase of warfare and global politics. Aside from a heightened risk of nuclear catastrophe, we are already in a perfect storm of mutually reinforcing global crises—the pandemic, climate change, biodiversity loss, and food and water shortages. The situation exhibits a basic madness: at a time when humanity’s very survival is jeopardised by ecological (and other) factors, and when addressing those threats should be prioritised over everything else, our primary concern has suddenly shifted—again—to a new political crisis. Just when global cooperation is needed more than ever, the “clash of civilizations” returns with a vengeance.

Why does this happen? As is often the case, a little Hegel can go a long way toward answering such questions. In the Phenomenology of Spirit, Hegel famously describes the dialectic of master and servant, two “self-consciousnesses” locked in a life-or-death struggle. If each is ready to risk his own life to win, and if both persist in this, there is no winner: one dies, and the survivor no longer has anyone to recognise his own existence. The implication is that all of history and culture rest on a foundational compromise: in the eye-to-eye confrontation, one side (the future servant) “averts its eyes,” unwilling to go to the end.

But Hegel would hasten to note that there can be no final or lasting compromise between states. Relationships between sovereign nation-states are permanently under the shadow of potential war, with each epoch of peace being nothing more than a temporary armistice.

This tendency runs directly against the urgent need to civilise our civilisations and establish a new mode of relating to our environs. We need universal solidarity and cooperation among all human communities. In 2017, the French philosopher Alain Badiou noted that the contours of a future war are already discernible. He foresaw:

“...the United States and their Western-Japanese group on the one side, China and Russia on the other side, atomic arms everywhere. We cannot but recall Lenin’s statement: ‘Either revolution will prevent the war or the war will trigger revolution.’ This is how we can define the maximal ambition of the political work to come: for the first time in history, the first hypothesis—revolution will prevent the war—should realise itself, and not the second one—a war will trigger revolution. It is effectively the second hypothesis which materialised itself in Russia in the context of the First World War, and in China in the context of the second. But at what price! And with what long-term consequences!”

The limits of realpolitik

Civilising our civilisations will require radical social change—a revolution, in fact. But we cannot afford to hope that a new war will trigger it. The far more likely outcome is the end of civilisation as we know it, with the survivors (if there are any) organised in small authoritarian groups. We should harbour no illusions: in some basic sense, World War III has already begun, though for now it is still being fought mostly through proxies.

Abstract calls for peace are not enough. “Peace” is not a term that allows us to draw the key political distinction that we need. Occupiers always sincerely

want peace in the territory they hold. Nazi Germany wanted peace in occupied France, Israel wants peace in the occupied West Bank, and Russian President Vladimir Putin wants peace in Ukraine. That is why, as the philosopher Étienne Balibar once put it, “pacifism is not an option.” The only way to prevent another Great War is by avoiding the kind of “peace” that requires constant local wars for its maintenance.

Whom can we rely on under these conditions? Should we place our confidence in artists and thinkers, or in pragmatic practitioners of realpolitik? The problem with artists and thinkers is that they, too, can lay the foundation for war. Recall William Butler Yeats’s apt verse: “I have spread my dreams under your feet, / Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.” We should apply these lines to poets themselves. When they spread their dreams under our feet, they should spread them carefully because actual people will read them and act upon them. Recall that the same Yeats continuously flirted with Fascism, going so far as to voice his approval of Germany’s anti-Semitic Nuremberg Laws in August 1938.

Realpolitik is no better guide. It has become a mere alibi for ideology, which often evokes some hidden dimension behind the veil of appearances in order to obscure the crime that is being committed openly. This double mystification is often announced by describing a situation as “complex.” An obvious fact—say, an instance of brutal military aggression—is relativized by evoking a “much more complex background.” The act of aggression is really an act of defence.

This is exactly what is happening today. Russia obviously attacked Ukraine, and is obviously targeting civilians and displacing millions. And yet commentators and pundits are eagerly searching for “complexity” behind it. There is complexity, of course. But that does not change the basic fact that Russia did it. Our mistake was that we did not interpret Putin’s threats literally enough; we thought he was just playing a game of strategic manipulation and brinkmanship.

This double mystification exposes the end of realpolitik. As a rule, realpolitik is opposed to the naivety of binding diplomacy and foreign policy to (one’s version of) moral or political principles. Yet in the current situation, it is realpolitik that is naïve. It is naïve to suppose that the other side, the enemy, is also aiming at a limited pragmatic deal.

Force and freedom

During the Cold War, the rules of superpower behaviour were clearly delineated by the doctrine of mutual assured destruction (MAD). Each superpower could be sure that if it decided to launch a nuclear attack, the other side would respond with full destructive force. As a result, neither side started a war with the other.

By contrast, when North Korea’s Kim Jong-un talks about dealing a devastating blow to the US, one cannot but wonder where he sees his own position. He talks as if he is unaware that his country, himself included, would be destroyed. It is as if he is playing an altogether different game called NUTS (Nuclear Utilisation Target Selection), whereby the enemy’s nuclear capabilities can be surgically destroyed before it can counterstrike.

Over the past few decades, even the US has oscillated between MAD and NUTS. Though it acts as if it continues to trust the MAD logic in its relations with Russia and China, it has occasionally been tempted to pursue a NUTS strategy vis-à-vis Iran and North Korea. With his hints about possibly launching a tactical nuclear strike, Putin follows the same reasoning.



A civilian trains to throw Molotov cocktails to defend Ukraine in Zhytomyr, Ukraine, on March 1, 2022.

PHOTO: REUTERS

While we should stand firmly behind Ukraine, we must avoid the fascination with war that has clearly seized the imaginations of those who are pushing for an open confrontation with Russia. Something like a new non-aligned movement is needed, not in the sense that countries should be neutral in the ongoing war, but in the sense that we should question the entire notion of the “clash of civilisations.”

Unfortunately for the rest of us, MADness is passé. Superpowers are increasingly testing each other, experimenting with the use of proxies as they try to impose their own version of global rules. On March 5, Putin called the sanctions imposed on Russia the “equivalent of a declaration of war.” But he has repeatedly stated since then that economic exchange with the West should continue, emphasising that Russia is keeping its financial commitments and continuing to deliver hydrocarbons to Western Europe.

In other words, Putin is trying to impose a new model of international relations. Rather than cold war, there should be hot peace: a state of permanent hybrid war in which military interventions are declared under the guise of peacekeeping and humanitarian missions. How often in the past have we heard similar arguments for US-led interventions in Latin America or the Middle East and North Africa?

Can anyone be free in such a predicament? Following Hegel, we should make a distinction between abstract and concrete freedom, which correspond to our notions of freedom and liberty. Abstract freedom is the ability to do what one wants independently of social rules and customs; concrete freedom is the freedom that is conferred and sustained by rules and customs. I can walk freely along a busy street only when I can be reasonably sure that others on the street will behave in a civilised way toward me—that drivers will obey traffic rules, and that other pedestrians will not rob me.

But there are moments of crisis when abstract freedom must intervene. In December 1944, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote: “Never were we freer than under the German occupation. We had lost all our rights, and first of all our right to speak. They insulted us to our faces. ... And that is why the Resistance was a true democracy; for the soldier, as for his superior, the same danger, the same loneliness, the same responsibility, the same absolute freedom within the discipline.”

Sartre was describing freedom, not liberty. Liberty is what was established when post-war normality returned. In Ukraine today, those who are battling the Russian invasion are free and they are fighting for liberty. But this raises the question of how long the distinction can last.

The not-so-great game

We still lack a proper word for today’s world. For her part, the philosopher Catherine Malabou believes we are witnessing the beginning of capitalism’s “anarchist turn”: “How else are we to describe such phenomena as decentralised currencies, the end of the

state’s monopoly, the obsolescence of the mediating role played by banks, and the decentralisation of exchanges and transactions?”

Those phenomena may sound appealing, but with the gradual disappearance of the state’s monopoly, state-imposed limits to ruthless exploitation and domination will also disappear. While anarcho-capitalism aims at transparency, it also “simultaneously authorises the large-scale but opaque use of data, the dark web, and the fabrication of information.”

To prevent this descent into chaos, Malabou observes, policies increasingly follow a path of “Fascist evolution... with the excessive security and military build-up that goes along with it. Such phenomena do not contradict a drive towards anarchism. Rather, they indicate precisely the disappearance of the state, which, once its social function has been removed, expresses the obsolescence of its force through the use of violence. Ultra-nationalism thus signals the death agony of national authority.”

Viewed in these terms, the situation in Ukraine is not one nation-state attacking another nation-state. Rather, Ukraine is being attacked as an entity whose very ethnic identity is denied by the aggressor.

A new non-alignment

But if we can be mobilised only by the threat of war, not by the threat to our environment, the liberty we will get if our side wins may not be worth having. We are faced with an impossible choice: if we make compromises to maintain peace, we are feeding Russian expansionism. But if we endorse full confrontation, we run the high risk of precipitating a new world war. The only real solution is to change the lens through which we perceive the situation.

While we should stand firmly behind Ukraine, we must avoid the fascination with war that has clearly seized the imaginations of those who are pushing for an open confrontation with Russia. Something like a new non-aligned movement is needed, not in the sense that countries should be neutral in the ongoing war, but in the sense that we should question the entire notion of the “clash of civilisations.”

The new non-alignment must broaden the horizon by recognising that our struggle should be global—and by counselling against Russophobia at all costs. We should offer our support to those within Russia who are protesting the invasion. They are not some abstract coterie of internationalists; they are the true Russian patriots.

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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- 14 Substantial
- 15 In the past
- 16 Holiday lead-in
- 18 Overly
- 19 Racket
- 20 Ozone, e.g.
- 21 Go astray
- 22 Soaked
- 24 Bassoon’s kin
- 25 Binary system
- 27 Weaving need
- 29 Takes an oath
- 32 Hockey’s Bobby
- 33 Letter before

omega

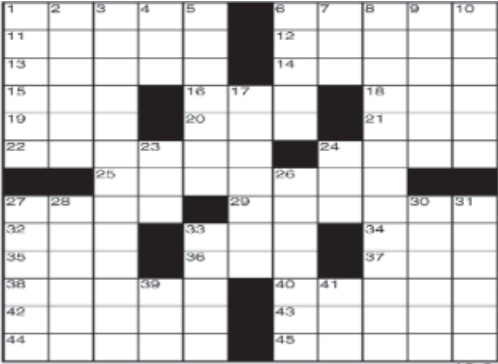
- 34 Sturgeon
- 35 Bounder
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