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Look back with angst

The First World War

A century on, there are uncomfortable parallels with the era that led to the outbreak of the first world war

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AS NEW YEAR approached a century ago, most people in the West looked forward to 1914 with optimism. The hundred years since the Battle of Waterloo had not been entirely free of disaster—there had been a horrific civil war in America, some regional scraps in Asia, the Franco-Prussian war and the occasional colonial calamity. But continental peace had prevailed. Globalisation and new technology—the telephone, the steamship, the train—had knitted the world together. John Maynard Keynes has a wonderful image of a Londoner of the time, “sipping his morning tea in bed” and ordering “the various products of the whole earth” to his door, much as he might today from Amazon—and regarding this state of affairs as “normal, certain and permanent, except in the direction of further improvement”. The Londoner might well have had by his bedside table a copy of Norman Angell’s “The Great Illusion”, which laid out the argument that Europe’s economies were so integrated that war was futile.

Yet within a year, the world was embroiled in a most horrific war. It cost 9m lives—and many times that number if you take in the various geopolitical tragedies it left in its wake, from the creation of Soviet Russia to the too-casual redrawing of Middle Eastern borders and the rise of Hitler. From being a friend of freedom, technology became an agent of brutality, slaughtering and enslaving people on a terrifying scale. Barriers shot up around the world, especially during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The globalisation that Keynes’s Londoner enjoyed only really began again in 1945—or, some would argue, in the 1990s, when eastern Europe was set free and Deng Xiaoping’s reforms began bearing fruit in China.

The driving force behind the catastrophe that befell the world a century ago was Germany, which was looking for an excuse for a war that would allow it to dominate Europe. Yet complacency was also to blame. Too many people, in London, Paris and elsewhere, believed that because Britain and Germany were each other’s biggest trading partners after America and there was therefore no economic logic behind the conflict, war would not happen. As Keynes put it, “The projects and politics of militarism and imperialism, of racial and cultural rivalries, of monopolies, restrictions and exclusion, which were to play the serpent to this paradise, were little more than the amusements of [the Londoner’s]...daily newspaper.”

Playing your role

Humanity can learn from its mistakes, as shown by the response to the economic crisis, which was shaped by a determination to avoid the mistakes that led to the Depression. The memory of the horrors unleashed a century ago makes leaders less likely to stumble into war today. So does

the explosive power of a modern conflagration: the threat of a nuclear holocaust is a powerful brake on the reckless escalation that dispatched a generation of young men into the trenches.

Yet the parallels remain troubling. The United States is Britain, the superpower on the wane, unable to guarantee global security. Its main trading partner, China, plays the part of Germany, a new economic power bristling with nationalist indignation and building up its armed forces rapidly. Modern Japan is France, an ally of the retreating hegemon and a declining regional power. The parallels are not exact—China lacks the Kaiser’s territorial ambitions and America’s defence budget is far more impressive than imperial Britain’s—but they are close enough for the world to be on its guard.

Which, by and large, it is not. The most troubling similarity between 1914 and now is complacency. Businesspeople today are like businesspeople then: too busy making money to notice the serpents flickering at the bottom of their trading screens. Politicians are playing with nationalism just as they did 100 years ago. China’s leaders whip up Japanophobia, using it as cover for economic reforms, while Shinzo Abe stirs Japanese nationalism for similar reasons. India may next year elect Narendra Modi, a Hindu nationalist who refuses to atone for a pogrom against Muslims in the state he runs and who would have his finger on the button of a potential nuclear conflict with his Muslim neighbours in Pakistan. Vladimir Putin has been content to watch Syria rip itself apart. And the European Union, which came together in reaction to the bloodshed of the 20th century, is looking more fractious and riven by incipient nationalism than at any point since its formation.

I have drunk and seen the spider

Two precautions would help prevent any of these flashpoints sparking a conflagration. One is a system for minimising the threat from potential dangers. Nobody is quite clear what will happen when North Korea implodes, but America and China need to plan ahead if they are to safeguard its nuclear programme without antagonising each other. China is playing an elaborately dangerous game of “chicken” around its littoral with its neighbours. Eventually, somebody is bound to crash into somebody else—and there is as yet no system for dealing with it. A code of maritime conduct for the area is needed.

The second precaution that would make the world safer is a more active American foreign policy. Despite forging an interim nuclear agreement with Iran, Barack Obama has pulled back in the Middle East—witness his unwillingness to use force in Syria. He has also done little to bring the new emerging giants—India, Indonesia, Brazil and, above all, China—into the global

system. This betrays both a lack of ambition and an ignorance of history. Thanks to its military, economic and soft power, America is still indispensable, particularly in dealing with threats like climate change and terror, which cross borders. But unless America behaves as a leader and the guarantor of the world order, it will be inviting regional powers to test their strength by bullying neighbouring countries.

The chances are that none of the world's present dangers will lead to anything that compares to the horrors of 1914. Madness, whether motivated by race, religion or tribe, usually gives ground to rational self-interest. But when it triumphs, it leads to carnage, so to assume that reason will prevail is to be culpably complacent. That is the lesson of a century ago.