

Washington Wired for War: Why Syria Could Spell World Catastrophe

When Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip fatally shot the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, archduke Franz Ferdinand, in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914, the assassination is seen as the event that ushered in the First World War. Within a month, the Great Powers of Europe would become embroiled in a four-year war owing to a web of alliances and treaties: Russia, France, Britain on the one hand; Germany, Italy, and the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires on the other. The US would eventually enter the maelstrom in April 1917 on the side of Britain and the Entente allies against the Central Powers.

The eventual death toll was between 10 and 16 million, making it one of the biggest cataclysms in human history. The war was, of course, not the consequence of a mere single act on that fateful day in Sarajevo. It was the culmination over many years of diplomatic and political skirmishing stemming from economic rivalry between the European capitalist powers. Although some later historians dispute the role of economics as the determinant, it is hard not to conclude as many others have done that the First World War was the classic outcome of imperialist rivalry.

In particular, the then top European power Britain had long seen the rising star of Germany as its nemesis for the control of markets and resources. For its part, the newly formed German Empire arising from the unification of Prussia in 1871 felt that its economic development was being unfairly thwarted by London.

This latent conflict over resources was underscored by several concomitant trends at the turn of the 20th century: the economic decline of Britain compared with the technological powerhouse of Germany; the "scramble for African colonies"; the encroachment of German industrialists upon newly discovered Persian oil fields; and the perceived threat to the eastward trade routes with India – the jewel in the crown of Britain's Empire.

The First World War can thus be seen as proof of the maxim conceived by military theorist Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831) that "war is but the continuation of politics by other means". The political and economic rivalry between Britain and Germany was in that way a powder keg that exploded into war upon a Serbian spark.

Turning to the present world situation and potential for conflict, it is likewise incumbent to see the bigger picture beyond immediate tensions and events. We need to see beyond the trees and branches in order to survey the entire forest; and not only the forest, but the historical road that leads up to the forest.

It is also critical for the appreciation of the scope for war in the present day to accept the premise that the capitalist economic system is at root "wired for war". Or as Karl Marx put it: "War is inherent in capitalism".

This premise of war as an integral part of capitalism holds because, under the iron law of the profit motive, nations will always be driven by an intense demand for natural resources and markets beyond national boundaries. As a result, nation states will always be thrown into competition for the control of resources and dominance in markets. This tendency towards conflict and eventually war may be held off for some time under conditions of quasi "peace" by international trade pacts and regulations, but eventually the do-or-die imperative of securing economic advantage will over-ride all supposedly civilised constraints.

The political and economic slide towards the headlong collision of the First World War is proof of that dynamic. By way of further proof, only 20 years after "the war to end all wars", following even deeper economic turmoil between nations, the

world was plunged into the even greater conflagration of the Second World War, which involved for the first time the deployment of nuclear weapons and a death toll exceeding 50 million.

Of utmost concern is that the contradiction between national antagonisms in the realm of international relations as dictated by capitalist economics is still far from resolved.

Granted, under the process of globalisation, nation state capitalism has expanded over recent decades to take on, increasingly, a transnational character and function. This has resulted in networks of global capital in the form of multinational banks and corporations. In that way, nation states can appear to be cooperating seamlessly in the function of global capital. The US can be seen as the executive power in the world capitalist system that also appears to seamlessly benefit Britain, France, Germany, Japan, China among others. Also because of historic institutional ties some nations are closer than others in the functioning of the capitalist order. Washington and London, for example, are closely aligned in the sphere of finance capitalism and consequently share overlapping national interests.

Nevertheless, despite the global character of capital, there is still a powerful demarcation of and competition between national interests among the capitalist powers.

One constant factor in the source of rivalry between nations is the control of oil, the lifeblood of the capitalist system. Indeed, the control of oil has become an even greater determinant today for international hegemony. This was well understood by US planners in the aftermath of the Second World War. With less than five per cent of the world's population, but consuming more than 25 per cent of the world's oil production, US planners have long been aware of the crucial importance of controlling global oil production for the preservation of America's economic power. This vital national interest far outweighs any much-vaunted American ideals of democratic values.

With more than 60 per cent of the world's proven oil and gas reserves located in the Middle East, this region is the ultimate key to continuing US global power. It was for this reason that the former US secretary of state James Baker candidly revealed in an interview on America's PBS Frontline programme in mid-October 2001 that Washington would always be ready and willing, as a matter of national security, to go to war in order to protect its ally Saudi Arabia and the other oil-rich Arab allies. The despotic, dictatorial nature of these regimes is a virtue, not a vice, for guaranteed American oil supply and the continued dominance of the US dollar as the world's reserve currency.

This is why today Washington remains silent on the crackdown by the House of Saud against pro-democracy protests in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. It is also the reason why Washington is allied with the Sunni dictatorships of Saudi Arabia and Qatar in the covert campaign for regime change against perceived recalcitrant governments in Syria and Iran, as it did in Libya with the overthrow and murder of Muammar Gaddafi.

At around the same time that Baker gave his interview outlining the unconditional support by Washington for the oil sheikhdoms, the Pentagon had then concocted a plan for redrawing the political map of the Middle East region and beyond, as the former NATO commander Wesley Clark was to later disclose. Over the ensuing years from late 2001, the Pentagon had designated regime change for seven countries: Iraq, Libya, Syria, Iran, Lebanon, Sudan and Somalia.

Subsequent events and interventions by Washington and its allies in these aforementioned countries – albeit under a guise of defending democracy, human rights and international law – indicates that the Pentagon's plan is being implemented methodically. The plan evidently holds whether the US president is a Republican or a Democrat, which points up the secret elite nature of government in Washington for which elections are mere window dressing.

These neo-imperialist interventions are not just about securing reliable supplies of the world's primary commodity for the

US and its capitalist allies. It is also equally about asserting hegemony over potential rivals for this resource and other markets. As with Britain at the turn of the 20th century, the economic decline of the US in the 21st century is palpable; the rise of China is to America today what Germany was to Britain one hundred years ago. Many analysts believe that is only a matter of a few years before China overtakes the US as the world's largest economy, with far-reaching implications for oil supply and demand.

The unveiling of new US military bases and partnerships in Australia, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, South Korea and Vietnam are the demonstration of Washington's increasing militarist agenda towards China. The calculated confrontation with China is what lies behind Washington's recent and much-heralded "pivot to the Pacific".

US-led military adventures in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and across sub-Saharan Africa are aimed at thwarting China's economic expansion, especially because Chinese partnerships have been welcomed in such countries. The NATO-induced regime change last year in Libya alone is reckoned to have cost China billions of dollars in oil and infrastructure investments. The same US game plan is unfolding covertly in Syria and Iran, with the Western powers and their Arab, Turk and Israeli allies waging a criminal war of state-sponsored terrorism and destabilisation. That is the bigger picture of immediate hostilities. How long China and its allies in Damascus, Tehran and Moscow will tolerate this provocation before engaging in all-out war is not clear. But one thing is clear: the repercussions of such an outcome will be cataclysmic.

Furthermore, when the trigger is pulled in the form of a downed fighter jet or a false flag terror attack on a tourist bus or some other incident, it can be said – like the assassination of archduke Ferdinand – that it was a long time in the making.

However, war is not inevitable. It is an ineluctable outcome of capitalist power rivalry, which history has shown us time and again. But it is not inevitable. The way to stop another world war is for the mass of people to put an end to the capitalist system. That means bringing governments, banks, industries and militaries under public, democratic control on the basis of internationalist solidarity.

We got nothing to lose except our chains.

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