[Yuval Noah Harari on how to prevent a new age of imperialism (economist.com)]

Putin, the West and the rest

Yuval Noah Harari on how to prevent a new age of imperialism

Non-Western powers have a stake in bringing peace to Ukraine, argues the historian

photograph: dan williams

Jun 3rd 2024

We fully appreciate our knees only when they stop working. The same is true of the global order: its former benefits become apparent only as it collapses. And when order collapses, the weak usually suffer most. This law of history should be on the minds of world leaders in the run-up to the Ukraine peace summit in Switzerland on June 15th. If peace cannot be restored and the international rules-based order continues to unravel, the catastrophic results will be felt globally.

Whenever international rules become meaningless, countries naturally seek safety in armaments and military alliances. Given events in Ukraine, can anyone blame Poland for almost doubling its army and military budget, Finland for joining nato or Saudi Arabia for pursuing a defence treaty with the United States?

Unfortunately, the increase in military budgets comes at the expense of society's weakest members, as money is diverted from schools and clinics to tanks and missiles. Military alliances, too, tend to widen inequality. Weak states left outside their protective shield become easy prey. As militarised blocs spread around the world, trade routes become strained and commerce declines, with the poor paying the highest price. And as tensions between the militarised blocs increase, chances grow that a small spark in a remote corner of the world will ignite a global conflagration. Since alliances rely on credibility, even a minor challenge in an insignificant location can become a casus belli for a third world war.

Humanity has seen it all before. More than 2,000 years ago Sun Tzu, Kautilya and Thucydides exposed how in a lawless world the quest for security makes everyone less secure. And past experiences like the second world war and the cold war have repeatedly taught us that in a global conflict it is the weak who suffer disproportionately.

During the second world war, for example, one of the highest casualty rates was in the Dutch East Indies—today's Indonesia. When the war broke out in eastern Europe in 1939, it seemed a world away from the rice farmers of Java, but events in Poland ignited a chain reaction that killed about 3.5m-4m Indonesians, mostly through starvation or forced labour at the hands of Japanese occupiers. This constituted 5% of the Indonesian population, a higher casualty rate than among many major belligerents, including the United States (0.3%), Britain (0.9%) and Japan (3.9%). Twenty years later Indonesia again paid a particularly heavy price. The cold war may have been cold in Berlin, but it was a scorching inferno in Jakarta. In 1965-66 between 500,000 and 1m Indonesians were killed in massacres caused by tensions between communists and anti-communists.

The situation now is potentially worse than it was in 1939 or 1965. It's not only that a nuclear war would endanger hundreds of millions of people in neutral countries. Humanity also faces the additional existential threats of climate change and out-of-control artificial intelligence (ai).

As military budgets rise, so money that could have helped solve global warming fuels a global arms race instead. And as military competition intensifies, so the goodwill necessary for agreements on climate change evaporates. Rising tensions also ruin the chance of reaching agreements on limiting an ai arms race. Drone warfare in particular is advancing rapidly, and the world may soon see swarms of fully autonomous drones fighting each other in Ukraine's sky, and killing thousands of people on the ground. The killer robots are coming, but humans are paralysed by disagreement. If peace isn't brought to Ukraine soon, everyone is likely to suffer, even if they live thousands of kilometres from Kyiv and think the battle there has nothing to do with them.

Breaking the biggest taboo

Making peace is never easy. It has been said that nations march into war through a barn door, but the only exit is through a mousehole. In the face of conflicting claims and interests, it is difficult to assign blame and find a reasonable compromise. Nevertheless, as wars go, the Russo-Ukrainian war is exceptionally simple.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine's independence and borders were universally recognised. The country felt so secure that it agreed to give up the nuclear arsenal it had inherited from the Soviet Union, without demanding that Russia or other powers do the same. In exchange, in 1994 Russia (as well as the United States and Britain) signed the Budapest Memorandum, promising to "refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence" of Ukraine. It was one of the biggest acts of unilateral disarmament in history. Swapping nuclear bombs for paper promises seemed to Ukrainians like a wise move in 1994, when trust in international rules and agreements ran high.

Twenty years later, in 2014, the Russo-Ukrainian war began when Russian forces occupied Crimea and fomented separatist movements in eastern Ukraine. The war ebbed and flowed for the following eight years, until in February 2022 Russia mounted an onslaught aimed at conquering all of Ukraine.

Russia has given various excuses for its actions, most notably that it was pre-empting a Western attack on Russia. However, neither in 2014 nor in 2022 was there any imminent threat of such an armed invasion. Vague talk about "Western imperialism" or "cultural Coca-Colonialism" may be good enough to fuel debates in ivory towers, but it cannot legitimate massacring the inhabitants of Bucha or bombing Mariupol to rubble.

For most of history the term "imperialism" referred to cases when a powerful state such as Rome, Britain or tsarist Russia conquered foreign lands and turned them into provinces. This kind of imperialism gradually became taboo after 1945. While there has been no shortage of wars in the late 20th and early 21st centuries—with horrendous conflicts ongoing in Palestine and Israel, and in Sudan, Myanmar and elsewhere—there have so far been no cases when an internationally recognised country was simply wiped off the map owing to annexation by a powerful conqueror. When Iraq tried to do that to Kuwait in 1990-91, an international coalition restored Kuwaiti independence and territorial integrity. And when the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, there was never a question of annexing the country or any part of it.

Russia has already annexed not just Crimea but also all the territories its armies are currently occupying in Ukraine. President Vladimir Putin is following the imperial principle that any territory conquered by the Russian army is annexed by the Russian state. Indeed, Russia went as far as annexing several regions that its armies merely intend to conquer, such as the unoccupied parts of Kherson, Zaporizhzhia and Donetsk oblasts.

Mr Putin has not bothered to hide his imperial intentions. He has repeatedly argued since at least 2005 that the collapse of the Soviet empire was "the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the century", and has promised to rebuild this empire. He has further argued that the Ukrainian nation doesn't really exist, and that Russia has a historical right to the entire territory of Ukraine.

If Mr Putin is allowed to win in Ukraine, this kind of imperialism will make a comeback all over the world. What will then restrain Venezuela, for example, from conquering Guyana, or Iran from conquering the United

Arab Emirates? What will restrain Russia itself from conquering Estonia or Kazakhstan? No border and no state could find safety in anything except armaments and alliances. If the taboo on imperial conquests is broken, then even states whose independence and borders won international recognition long ago will face a growing risk of invasion, and even of again becoming imperial provinces.

This danger is not lost on observers in former imperial colonies. In a speech in February 2022 the Kenyan ambassador to the un, Martin Kimani, explained that after the collapse of the European empires newly liberated people in Africa and elsewhere treated international borders as sacrosanct, for they understood that the alternative was waging endless wars. African countries have inherited many potentially disputed borders from the imperial past, yet, as Mr Kimani explained, "we agreed that we would settle for the borders that we inherited…Rather than form nations that looked ever backward into history with a dangerous nostalgia, we chose to look forward to a greatness none of our many nations and peoples had ever known." Referring to Mr Putin's attempt to rebuild the Soviet empire, Mr Kimani said that although imperial collapse typically leaves many unfulfilled yearnings, these should never be pursued by force. "We must complete our recovery from the embers of dead empires in a way that does not plunge us back into new forms of domination and oppression."

As Mr Kimani hinted, the driving force behind Russia's invasion of Ukraine is imperial nostalgia. Russia's territorial demands in Ukraine have no basis in international law. Of course, like every country, Russia does have legitimate security concerns, and any peace agreement must take them into account. During the past century Russia has suffered repeated invasions that cost the lives of many millions of its citizens. Russians deserve to feel secure and respected. But no Russian security concerns can justify destroying Ukrainian nationhood. Nor should they cause us to forget that Ukraine too has legitimate security concerns. Given events of the past decade, Ukraine clearly needs guarantees against future Russian aggression more robust than the Budapest Memorandum or the Minsk Agreements of 2014-15.

Empires have always justified themselves by prioritising their own security concerns, but the larger they became the more security concerns they acquired. Ancient Rome first embarked on its imperial project because of security concerns in central Italy, and eventually found itself fighting brutal wars thousands of kilometres from Italy because of its security concerns on the Danube and Euphrates. If Russia's security concerns are acknowledged as a legitimate basis for making conquests on the Dnieper, they too may soon be used to justify conquests on the Danube and Euphrates.

Humanity's next leaders

To prevent a new age of imperialism, leadership is needed from many directions. The upcoming Ukraine peace summit can provide the stage for two particularly important steps.

First, European countries, some of which could be the next targets of Russian imperialism, should make a firm commitment to support Ukraine no matter how long the war lasts. As Russia intensifies its campaign to destroy Ukraine's energy infrastructure, for example, Europe should guarantee Ukraine's energy supply from power stations in nato countries. And no matter what happens in the American elections in November, Europe should commit to providing Ukraine with the money and weapons it needs to continue protecting itself. Given the isolationist tendencies of the Republican Party and other segments of American society, Europe cannot rely on the United States to do the heavy lifting.

Such commitments are the only thing that will convince Russia to negotiate for peace in earnest. Russia has much to lose from a prolonged war. Every month the war drags on, Mr Putin's dream of making his country a great power fades, because Ukrainian hostility towards Russia deepens, Russia's dependence on other powers increases and Russia falls further behind in key technological races. The prolongation of the war threatens to turn Russia into a Chinese vassal. Nevertheless, if Mr Putin thinks Europeans are getting tired of supporting Ukraine, he will play for time in the hope of finally conquering the country. Only when it becomes clear that Europe is in this for the long haul can serious peace talks begin.

The second important step is greater leadership from non-European countries. Rising powers like Brazil, India, Indonesia and Kenya often criticise Western powers for past imperialist crimes and for present incompetence and favouritism. There is indeed much to criticise. But it is better to take centre-stage and lead than to stand on

the sidelines and play the game of whataboutism. Non-Western powers should act to protect the international order not to oblige a declining West, but for their own benefit. This will require powers like Brazil and India to expend political capital, take risks and, if all else fails, take a stand in defence of international rules. This will not be cheap, but the price of doing nothing will be much higher.

In September 2022 Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India told Mr Putin that “today’s era is not the era for war”. When Mr Modi later recalled their conversation he added that today’s era “is one of dialogue and diplomacy. And we all must do what we can to stop the bloodshed and human suffering.” Many months have passed since Mr Modi expressed these sentiments. Unless decisive action is taken by world leaders, it seems that the era of dialogue will be over, and a new era of unlimited war will be upon us.

Leaders from around the world should therefore attend the forthcoming summit, and work together to bring a just and enduring end to the war. Securing peace in Ukraine would position these leaders as global pathfinders who can be trusted to resolve other conflicts, tackle climate change and runaway ai, and guide humanity in the troubled 21st century.■