The return of the great power rivalries

The post-Cold War period of peace in Europe is more an aberration than norm in the continent's history of conflicts

STANLY JOHNY

Herr von Tschirschky, a diplomat and politician in imperial Germany, said on New Year's Day 1906 in Hamburg: "Germany's policy always had been, and would be, to try to frustrate any coalition between two states which might result in damaging Germany's interests and prestige; and Germany... would not hesitate to take such steps as she thought proper to break up the coalition." Tschirschky, who would become Foreign Secretary in two weeks, was referring to the Franco-British Entente and Germany's growing concerns about it.

The security situation in Europe was undergoing massive changes. The Russian power had collapsed in its far east after the war with Japan in 1904-05. Faced with the erosion of Russian influence and the rise of Wilhelmine Germany, which together threatened to alter Europe's balance of power, France and Britain, competing colonial powers, came together. France had already reached an alliance with Russia. The three would later form the Triple Entente, triggering a dangerous security competition in Europe with the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy), which would eventually lead to the First World War in 1914.

Similarities from the past

There are similarities between events in Europe today and what happened in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. What triggered the great power security competition in the run-up to the First World War was the phenomenal rise of Wilhelmine Germany as a military and industrial power and the regional hegemons' response to it. When Otto von Bismarck became the Minister-President of Prussia in September 1862, there was no unified German state. Prussia was part of the loose, ineffective German Confederation. Bismarck adopted an aggressive foreign policy, fought and won three wars – with Denmark, Austria and France – destroyed the confederation, established a stronger and larger German Reich that replaced Prussia.

In the last 20 years of Bismarck's reign, Germany, and Europe at large, saw relative peace. That was not because the Chancellor had turned a peacenik but because he was constrained by the geopolitical realities of Europe. Bismarck stayed focused on transforming Germany internally in his last two decades. It was on the foundation Bismarck built that Wilhelmine Germany turned to *weltpolitik* in the early 20 century, seeking global domination.

If Bismarck inherited a weak, loosely connected group of German speaking entities in 1862, Russian President Vladimir Putin got a Russia in 2000 that was a pale shadow of what was the Soviet Union. Russia had lost huge swathes of territories, its economy was in a free fall, its currency had crashed, the living standards of millions of Russians had collapsed and the global stature of the country, which had been one of the two pillars of the post-War global order for almost half a century, had fallen. Bismarck spent his years in power expanding the borders of Germany and building a stronger state and economy. His successors took it further to challenge the existing great powers in Europe. The post-Cold War Russia initially stayed focused on the restoration of the state and the economy, and then sought to expand its borders and challenge the continent's balance of power – first the Crimean annexation and now the Ukraine invasion.

The existing great powers in Europe saw Germany as a threat to Europe's balance of power and joined hands to contain its rise. Germany, on the other side, saw the formation of the Entente as an existential threat and took steps to weaken the alliance (The 1905 and 1911 Morocco crises and the German intervention in the Bosnia crisis in 1908). The parallels are hardly to be missed. If Germany was seen as a revisionist power back then, Vladimir Putin's Russia is today's revisionist power in Europe. If Germany felt insecure by the Triple Entente, as Tschirschky warned in 1906, Russia has constantly voiced concerns about the eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). If the Entente countries looked at the rise of Germany as a threat to European power balance, the western alliance continued to see modern Russia as a security challenge, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union. While NATO's expansion deepened Russia's security concerns, driving it into aggressive moves, Russia's aggression has strengthened NATO's resolve to expand further into Russia's neighbourhood.

On 'offensive realism'

The behaviour of 20th century Germany and 21st century Russia can best be explained using what John Mearsheimer calls "offensive realism". Offensive realists argue that "revisionist powers" tend to use force to rewrite the balance of power if they find the circumstances are favourable, while the status quo powers, or the existing regional hegemons, would seek to thwart any new country attaining more power at their expense. The result of this type of competition is permanent rivalry and conflict. Look at Mr. Putin's offensive moves. He sent troops to Georgia, practically ending that country's NATO ambitions. He took Crimea without fighting a war. He sent troops to Syria not just to save the regime of Bashar al-Assad and protect Russia's Mediterranean naval base in Tartus but also to neutralise Turkey and Israel, both Syria's neighbours. He reinforced Russia's primacy in Central Asia by bringing peace to the Nagorno-Karabakh and dispatching forces to restore order in Kazakhstan. These successes probably raised the confidence of Russia, prompting its leaders to believe that it was finally strong enough to change Europe's balance of power forcefully. Then, Russia invaded Ukraine.

But one major difference between the era of Wilhelmine Germany and modern Russia is that there were no well-defined international laws in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The international system has evolved ever since. But its basic instincts, as realists would argue, have not changed much. Mr. Putin's Russia is not the first country that violated the sovereignty of a weaker power and flouted international laws in the "rules-based" order. Nor will it be the last. As the Athenians told the Melians during the Peloponnesian War, "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must".

Security competition

As the Ukraine war grinds into its fourth month, there are no clear winners in Europe. Russia apparently had two strategic objectives in Ukraine – one, to expand Russian borders and create a buffer. And two, to reinforce Russia's deterrence against NATO. While Russia has succeeded, though slowly, in expanding its borders by capturing almost all of Ukraine's east, the war has backfired on its second objective – Russia's inability to clinch a quick outright victory in Ukraine and the tactical retreats it has already made have invariably dealt a blow to the perception of Russian power that existed before the war. This has strengthened NATO, driving even Sweden and Finland into its arms. Besides, the economic sanctions would leave a long-term hole in Russia's economy.

But a Russia that is bogged down in Ukraine and encircled by NATO need not enhance Europe's security. Russia's advances in Ukraine may have been slow; it seemed ready to fight a war of attrition like the long wars European countries fought against each other in the past. And despite the strong resistance it faced in Ukraine, Russia remains too strong a military and geopolitical power to be brushed aside. As Henry Kissinger said at Davos, Russia had been and would remain an important element in the European state system.

The prospects are bleak. There will not be peace in Europe unless either Russia accepts its diminished role and goes into another spell of strategic retreat (like it did after the disintegration of the Soviet Union), or Europe and the West in general accommodate Russia's security concerns. Both look unrealistic as of today. This means that even if the war in Ukraine comes to an end, the security contest in Europe would continue. The post-Cold War period of relative peace and stability in Europe, anchored in liberal internationalism, was an aberration rather than a norm in the continent's long history of conflicts. And what makes the latest round of great power rivalry more dangerous is that there are nuclear weapons on both sides.