

The Enchantment of Mutually Assured Destruction

by George Friedman - October 23, 2019

One of the most extraordinary facts of history is that during the Cold War the United States and the Soviet Union never launched a war against each other. They probed and prodded on the edges of war, but it never rose to its logical conclusion: nuclear war. When we consider the sophisticated statesmen of 1914 and 1939 who led Europe into catastrophe, it is the world's good fortune that they were not the ones managing the Cold War. Rather it was being managed by the United States and the Soviet Union, who were meticulously and obsessively careful to avoid war. The irony is that many Europeans tend to regard Americans as cowboys and the Russians as barbarians, and themselves as sophisticated and cautious. Yet it was the European gentlemen who hurled themselves into wars of slaughter, while the cowboys and barbarians did everything they could to avoid war. This is an important point I like to make, especially in meetings with Europeans.

There was of course a fundamental difference between the two world wars and the one that never happened. The Europeans believed that these wars would be contained. The French in 1914 did not appreciate what the machine gun could do. The Germans didn't appreciate what massed bombers could do in 1939. This was a failure of imagination. There could be no failure of imagination about nuclear weapons. If anything, imagination was insufficient to grasp what they would do. The Europeans should have known what machine guns and bombers could do, but they didn't. The Americans and Russians could not evade the truth.

Still, each nation had to survive, and to survive it had to know the unknowable: what the real intention was on the other side. In war, surprise with overwhelming forces is the dream. Not knowing your enemy's intent is the nightmare. Barring information to the contrary, each side should have struck first and fast. That neither side did was not due to their virtue. It was due to the fact that the Soviets in the 1950s could not have launched a massive first strike at the U.S., and therefore the U.S. did not strike either. "Dr. Strangelove" was nonsense intended to depict the thoughtful and careful political and military leaders as demented. They weren't.

In due course the Soviets developed a first-strike capability, and that was the moment of danger. Whoever struck first, with massive surprise, would survive. The other would not. Wars sometimes arise out of lack of imagination. A nuclear exchange would arise out of a lack of knowledge – not knowing what the other side was capable of, and not knowing each intended, but knowing that if the

enemy struck first, he would survive.

What prevented nuclear war was mutual assured destruction. So long as each side understood that an attack would trigger an equal response, war was avoided. The only way to guarantee that was to make certain that each side was aware of the other's capabilities, and that each side could detect an attack with enough time to respond. By maximizing intelligence and minimizing the probability of surprise, the risk of attacking was overwhelmed by the probability of an equal counterattack. There are those who regarded mutual assured destruction as madness. I have never understood why. We are humans and we go to war, but this war was avoided.

Of Aristotle's virtues, it was prudence that governed. But prudence could have also dictated a first strike. Prudence was redefined by technology. The Soviets focused on constructing a missile force. As a spinoff of the missile force, they launched a satellite, Sputnik, into low-Earth orbit. The Americans were galvanized to do the same, but propaganda aside, creating satellites opened the door to a prudence of peace. A few years after the first demonstration satellites were launched, so were reconnaissance satellites, which would observe and target enemy missile bases, and years later, satellites that could detect the heat of a missile launch. The satellites made it possible to know the enemy's capabilities and detect a missile attack with enough warning that a counterattack was possible. No one was really certain that their own or the other side's systems would work, but no one was certain they wouldn't. The probability of a one-sided victory through surprise shrank, and prudence dictated avoiding any action that might frighten the other side. The Cold War evolved into a political, or low-intensity, conflict, rather than catastrophe. And the leaders of both sides were shaped to be masters at pressing an advantage without excessively frightening the adversary.

After World War I, intellectuals sought to understand the origin of war in the human psyche, which is what the sophisticated called the soul. Men in particular possess within themselves a rage that, when unleashed, can be satisfied only by violence. They also possess a fear not only of death or harm, but of shame in defeat, or worse, fleeing the battlefield. There is nothing original in this, as Homer wrote about it. The followers of Sigmund Freud sought this dichotomy in the subconscious rage against the primal father. In doing this, they turned war into a compulsion, a necessary part not of history or society but of the very souls of men. The rage would in the end overwhelm fear, and brush aside prudence. I myself learned about this in school at PS 67 in the Bronx, when I insisted on fighting Hector in spite of the fact that he had crushed and would again crush me.

But in the Cold War, and in the satellites both sides launched, we find that reality can impose a prudence that overwhelms the primal rage in men. From space, we could see the enemy and the

enemy could see us. Whatever our rage at each other, it could be tempered by prudence. The idea that war is the result of a need so deep it cannot be controlled was shown to be false. The need for war may well exist, but it does not rule.

Space was the sphere that made the war impossible. If you will recall my earlier discussion of enchantment, my detour into space is intended to bring us back to that theme. In much of the world, heaven, or space, is the realm of peace and redemption. It is an enchanted place. The fact that we avoided annihilating each other was not to be found in our souls, which were filled with the rage that haunts us all. Rather it was the fact that we humans, using space, changed the equation between rage and fear. Before World War I and World War II, rage overwhelmed fear, and prudence argued for war. The Cold War remained cold because the logic of technology, and the existence of the heavens, dampened the soul of the angriest warriors. Many died in lesser wars, but our two nations survived. That was quite enough of an achievement in the 20th century.

I am not trying to make enchantment mystical; I am trying to demystify it. But at the same time, those astronauts of all nations who have gone into space have testified to an awesome beauty that was beyond their ability to express. The word they never used was enchantment. It is a sphere that has been the realm of gods, a place where a higher law governs. It has struck me many times that while we have come to think of space as prosaic, as the realm of technicians and budgets, it is enchanting for two reasons. First, it is enchanting because it is beautiful and our bodies float in violation of all laws we know. Second, it is enchanting because it rendered impossible a war that should by all rights have been fought.

There are many technical reasons, but we should stop and consider how extraordinary it is that heaven imposed prudence on the rage Freud wrote of. Whether it can continue to do so is a question for later, but it is extraordinary that the sphere that we had entered for the first time, because of the Cold War, was the place which made that war impossible.

Hence there is a connection among my ramblings, although I am still poking at it uncertainly.

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