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Attack on the Future

By Michael Lee

Some political actions and policies are so short-sighted and cause so much long-term damage to the balance of power in the world that they become attacks on the future. This is especially true when they set in motion a chain reaction of cause-and-effect in the interacting, interlocking political and economic systems of the world, leading to catastrophic loss of life, environmental destruction and/or social collapses.

The worst such political chain reaction in history occurred in the twentieth century. I've alluded on several occasions to the consequences of the assassination in Sarajevo of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and his wife Sophie, on Sunday, June 28 1914. The two shots fired that day by a 24 year-old Serbian radical called Gustavo Princip triggered a complex chain reaction of political events. As heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, the archduke's death could not go unanswered. In response, this empire soon declared war on Serbia. But allies of both sides reacted and became embroiled in the conflict which escalated into World War I. Then in 1918, the peace of Versailles which ended this war has been widely seen as one of the causes of the Second World War due to the overly severe conditions it imposed on the defeated Germany. After the Second World War, the two new superpowers emerging from that international conflict, the USA and the USSR, entered into a Cold War between communism and capitalism which lasted until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Between June 28, 1914 and November 9, 1989, when the guards at the checkpoints of East Berlin first allowed East Germans to freely pass into West Berlin, there had been two world wars, followed by a Cold War between from 1947, all triggered in a chain reaction by two bullets from a young assassin. Totting up the military and civilian deaths in these conflicts gives us about 81.7 million lives lost in 75 years of interconnected twentieth political conflict, a rate of well over 1 million deaths per year, or 2740 deaths per day. The tragic assassination in Sarajevo, followed by over-reactions by political leaders of the time, constituted an attack on the whole century.

Likewise, 9/11 was an attack on the future of the 21st century.

It is over a decade since the invasion of Iraq on March 20, 2003. Now it looks like Part Two of that war is about to get underway given the extreme provocations of the Islamic State during their unholy rampage across Syria and Iraq. In hindsight, the ill-conceived invasion of Iraq has constituted an attack on the future of our world order.

Given the exceedingly complex interconnections between political systems in the world, overreactions to provocations, leading to chain reactions, could well be the most common cause of war in modern times.

The recent Israeli/Gaza war, for example, was ignited by the abduction and murder of three young Israeli hitchhikers, Eyal Yifrach, Naftali Fraenkel and Gil-Ad Shaer, on June 12th this year, even though the presence of underground tunnels dug out by Hamas was clearly an underlying national security risk to Israel. I argued in a previous blog that a state of fear and paranoia prevails on both sides, fed by decades of mutual distrust, which magnifies perceived threats and can lead to disproportionate reactions. Would this war, and its terrible loss of life and destruction, really have been seen as necessary and unavoidable if the situation had been viewed from a long-term perspective outside of the prevailing state of fear and anger?

Today's highly precarious world situation, which can be summed up as "the West versus radicalized Islam" plus "the West versus Russia in Cold War 2" is a result of misguided, short-term and, at times, paranoid foreign policies like regime change which have had little, or no, chance of being sustainable over the long term.

One of the key vulnerabilities in the global world today, dominated by Western powers and systems, is that there is a chronic shortage of foresight in political circles. This is not surprising given the time cycles of four to five years for electoral politics in current democracies. There's a disconnect, or disharmony, between the length of these election cycles and the time cycles for building trade and other ties of peace with nations, for economic "boom and bust", for technology and product development cycles, for lifecycles of major resources, such as fossil fuels, as well many natural and environmental cycles like climate change and eco-system sustainability.

In other words, most political systems are being governed in windows of four years. But the rest of the world needs long-term management because its cycles are much longer than that narrow window of governance.

As a result of this disconnect of time cycles, the two most dangerous categories of human beings on the planet today are organized criminals and politicians, the former because they are malicious and powerful, the later because they are short-sighted and powerful. Ironically, it is democratically elected politicians, in particular, who are locked into short time-frames determined by their election cycles. How can a political leadership team possibly govern wisely when it must comply with time periods out of kilter with the management of most other cycles of life, whether natural, economic, cultural or social?

This is a serious constitutional flaw. Consequently, I recommended that the duration of election cycles in democracies be doubled, or even trebled, to become better synchronised with the critical lifecycles of the world's systems. It is clear that the short termism of political leaders is caused by the short-term political cycles to which they are subject for their political existence and which are not matched to longer time cycles of sustainability and long-term growth.

If leading democracies do not extend their election cycles to ten or even fifteen years, I doubt there ever will be, or can be, a long-lasting world peace.