Backward Goes the Doomsday Clock

By JOHN MUELLER

The New York Academy of Sciences sponsored a conference last month on "The High Technologies and Reducing the Risk of War." Instead of worrying so much about what might raise or lower the likelihood of war, it might be interesting sometime to estimate what that likelihood currently is.

Major war, in fact, may have become so wildly improbable as to be considered obsolete. And this development has more to do with politics and history than with high (or low) tech.

The U.S. and the Soviet Union have long been engaged in a political contest that largely springs from the Soviet commitment to a gradual process of world revolution and from the U.S. belief that this process ultimately threatens America's fundamental values and security. For the most part, the Soviet Union sees its commitment to revolution as a long-term process of class warfare in country after country. It has stressed methods like subversion, local uprising, riots, limited military and diplomatic pressure, and guerrilla and civil war. It does not seem to see major war as a viable way for improving the state of the world as it sees it: The costs, even if the war could be kept non-nuclear, are likely to be far too high. In opposing the Soviet drive the U.S. also has been interested, in part for similar elemental reasons, in avoiding a major conflagration. Thus major war, if everything can be kept more or less under control, is not now, and never has been, in the cards.

As most people see it, war is most likely to evolve if the political contest gets out of control—a disagreement leads to a crisis that eventually escalates to war. Obviously, given the horrific costs of a major war, efforts to minimize escalatory tendencies and to achieve "crisis stability" are valid and wise.

But happily it seems that these efforts aren't greatly needed. Real crises between the two big powers have been very rare and they seem to be getting rarer—with the possible exception of the alerts during the Yom Kippur War of 1973, we haven't had a true bone-crunching confrontational crisis for nearly a quarter-century. And the crises we have had in the cold-war era have fizzled at remarkably low levels: In the worst of these, the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, the U.S.S.R. never even went on military alert. There has been plenty of disagreement over the past few decades, but the most notable trend has been an economic intertwining of the big power blocs, not a race toward conflagration. Both major powers have been exceedingly cautious about approaching the brink, and if anything they're getting more cautious, not less so.

Other methods for getting into war seem even less probable. It is sensible to worry about nuclear-weapons accidents, but it is difficult to see how an isolated accident could lead to major war. Wars do not start by accident and, to have even a chance of causing one, the accident probably would have to occur during a warlike crisis—that is, two unlikely events would have to occur simultaneously.

The proliferation of nuclear weapons to countries or groups that do not now have them may be dangerous, but a third party or nuclear terrorist is hardly going to touch off war between the major powers. (Actually, one of the most remarkable aspects of the history of the past half-century has been how wrong doom-sayers such as John Kennedy—who foresaw 15 to 20 nuclear powers by the 1970s—have been about the pace of proliferation.)

Of course we could eventually get so used to our perpetual freedom from major war and so used to living with the bomb that we get too casual about it. But at least among countries outside of the Third World there actually may be a long and inexorable trend away from war. Centuries ago Sweden and Denmark changed their warlike approach to the world around them and have been peaceful ever since. Perhaps they were the wave of the future. In more recent times, we've seen the more neighborly behavior of France and Germany, major powers that had spent decades—centuries, even—either fighting each other or planning to do so.

The case of Japan is also instructive: a formerly aggressive major power that seems now to have fully embraced the virtues (and profits) of peace. Indeed, within the major power blocs the rhetoric about war has changed profoundly, and perhaps permanently. A century ago some prominent thinkers declared that war was a means of moral purification and spiritual enlargement, a promoter of such virtues as orderliness, cleanliness and personal valor. One simply doesn't hear that anymore.

(In fact, warfare of all sorts seems generally to have lost its appeal within Europe over the past 40 years. The only instance of truly sustained armed civil warfare in the area has occurred in Northern Ireland. Except for the fleeting case of Hungary in 1956, people under Soviet domination have not resorted to significant violence, no matter how desperate the disaffection. Even as dedicated a foe of the Soviet regime as Alexandr Solzhenitsyn has said, "I have never advocated physical general revolution. That would entail such destruction of our people's life as would not merit the victory obtained." In Western Europe spurts of terrorism carried out by tiny bands of self-styled revolutionaries have never coalesced into anything bigger.)

A quarter century ago, strategist-technologist Herman Kahn expressed his deep concern that "we are not going to reach the year 2000—and maybe not even the year 1965—without a cataclysm." He proposed that "to control our destiny, we will need much better mechanisms than we have had for forward thinking." Reflecting again on the cases of Sweden and Denmark, of France and Germany, and of Japan, it might be suggested that there is a longer-term solution to the arms competition between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, and that it doesn't have much to do with "mechanisms" or even with "forward thinking." Should political tensions decline, as to a considerable degree they have since the classic cold-war era of 1945-63 when crisis was comparatively commonplace, it may be that the arms race, like once-fashionable dueling, eventually will dissipate. Such a condition would be brought about not principally by ingenious agreements over arms controls or by crafty developments in high tech, but by atrophy stemming from a dawning realization that, since preparations for major war are essentially irrelevant, they are profoundly foolish.

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