

Turbulence Ahead

Gabriel Kolko

Gabriel Kolko is the leading historian of modern warfare. He is the author of the classic Century of War: Politics, Conflicts and Society since 1914, Another Century of War? and The Age of War: the US Confronts the World, and After Socialism. He has also written the best history of the Vietnam War, Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the US and the Modern Historical Experience. His latest book is World in Crisis.

Both Europe and the United States confront great crises; while they are different in certain regards they have important similarities, too. America's crisis is both military and economic; they are inter-related because America has a huge deficit, in large part because it has the chimerical ambition to be the world's dominating military power, which costs it immense sums of money, which its deficit spending largely funds. At the same time, it has lost most of its major conflicts militarily, politically – or both. Europe is at the threshold of crucial economic decisions, and they also have grave political implications, whose effects are likely to last for many years. In essence, in Europe the question is whether or not German power or domination of the continental economy will be revived under the guise of pan-Europeanism.

The United States has been on the wrong track in terms of what it can attain. It still regards itself as having abilities which the events of the past century – wars, political crisis, and the like – have shown are beyond its or any country's power to control. America is having a very hard time being a 'normal' nation that recognizes the limits and nature of its power. It is spending immense sums of money to be able to attain goals beyond its capacity. The German government under Angela Merkel is using pan-European methods to resurrect German power, but in ways that is developing important resistance. In their own ways, both the United States and most of Europe are at important turning points – and they will affect each other.

Those who are critical of the existing

world, whether the United States or elsewhere, have ample reason to be pessimistic: rightist, chauvinist forces are becoming stronger both politically and ideologically in the US, the Netherlands, and France. At the same time, in France, Greece, Serbia, Italy, and elsewhere, German Chancellor Angela Merkel's draconian economic austerity programme, for a balanced government budget and other conservative nostrums for Europe, has cost the centrist parties who support her crucial votes in elections, as seen in France, Greece, and the United Kingdom's local elections at the beginning of May. Ms. Merkel's austerity ideas, and the so-called technocrats in Italy and elsewhere who supported them, are now on the defensive. Europe's electorate is in the process of rejecting them, and the European Union may collapse. If it does, the American economy is especially going to be affected.

Ms. Merkel's austerity programme ignored its effects on the average citizen of Europe; it was hurting them (intentionally), often disastrously, in the form of unemployment, lower standards of living, longer hours and working years for those who still have jobs – and the first time they could vote they did so in a way that made the technocrats' diktats irrelevant. She was very likely to be rejected at the polls, and was! But as of this time, events at the polls have not dented her ideas on how Europe's economy should evolve. She has remained consistent but she or the new French President, François Hollande, must bend, at least a bit, or else the eurozone will fall apart. Time will tell who flinches first, but neither might and then the future will be inevitable. Europe may be thrown into chaos; it may patch up its differences for a while, but sooner or later it is likely to fall apart economically.

The future of a common European economy is now more in doubt than ever. The immediate outcome of the French, Greek, and other elections in early May was a fall in the value of the euro and a decline in the European stock markets. Voters in the recent provincial elections in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany's most populous state, and earlier in Schleswig-Holstein, have overwhelmingly rejected Merkel's party's dominant position, putting her and her programme's future very much in limbo. Support for Ms. Merkel's Christian Democratic Union plummeted to about 26% from 35%, its worst showing yet in the state. Merkel's policies are leading to political defeat for the conservative and technocratic forces in Germany and much of Europe.

Sarkozy, in any event, has been swept from power, as much or more for supporting Germany's austerity ideas as any other factor. Germany's hegemony over Europe's economic future does not have backing in many

nations that fought Germany twice, and the resurrection of German power is an integral aspect and goal of Merkel's economic programme. Those wars are still important: many people have long memories and suffered much during them. That he was a flashy playboy did Sarkozy no good but was not, in my opinion, decisive. Those who supported Merkel's ideas for wringing the average person's economic well-being to balance the budget have been rejected. The Left has become stronger, but so has the extreme-Right.

The notion of a European economic bloc, with a common economic programme, is more and more politically difficult to sustain in the face of the varied political forces that oppose it. It is more likely than ever to collapse amidst social protests, rising unemployment and the negative social effects of the quaint, old-fashioned conservative nostrums it proposes.

The crisis in the American military

Those in power have as much reason to be pessimistic, and many of them have been for a long time. The US fights wars – almost compulsively. Grandiose visions of American power in the world leads them to intervene in places all over the globe, but so far it has lost many of its adventures, including full-scale wars, such as Vietnam. This has virtually bankrupted the United States in the process. There is no correlation between expenditures, firepower or numerical superiority of manpower or *matériel*. The result is that growing numbers in the defence establishment are increasingly frustrated with a very expensive system that fails to deliver the results promised.

People on the Left are not the only ones who are disappointed or believe the future looks dismal. The system is not working as it's supposed to. It simply doesn't function as those in power hoped it would, and they have infinitely more resources at their command than Leftists. Their failure is more interesting; they have power but cannot attain their goals, and there are many reasons for it. Moreover, they are increasingly acknowledging this. Most believers in the status quo are still blind to their failure, and I am discussing a small minority. But there are many reasons the existing system is not attaining its goals, and they should be recognized even if this system is not likely to fall soon.

In 1992, Paul Wolfowitz drafted a document that said the US must be the world's sole superpower and other nations must recognize their place in the world order. It was extremely belligerent and ambitious, but his theories and his intelligence conflict with each other – which makes

him embarrassingly inconsistent. He may not have changed his mind but, by 2002, he was adding crucial contingencies to his grandiose past ambitions that admitted the world scene was more complex than his earlier statements implied. Most important, he admitted one could never tell what might happen next – the major challenges confronting the United States and the world were unpredictable.

‘... I mean, we don’t have a war plan for the contingencies ... we might face in 2010 or 2015. We’ve got to find some other ways of measuring the risk in that way ...’

If you cannot predict, how can you plan? The answer is clear: you cannot; you proceed blindly. But if you spend money like the US Defence establishment does, blindness about the nature of threats is a very grave situation in which to lose taxpayers’ money and run up national deficits, much less get into losing wars. The money, essentially, keeps arms makers in profit and creates jobs, but has scant relationship to real military needs or future military crises. The gross federal debt in fiscal year 2013 is \$17.5 trillion. There are other ways to calculate this, but sooner or later these immense sums have to be confronted without creating an economic crisis, and that is extremely difficult.

No foreign invader has ever won a war in Afghanistan, and attaining military victories is not the same as winning wars. A large majority of the American public is today – as opposed to when it started – against continuing the war on the Taliban, a conflict which has already gone on for over a decade and cost the US almost 4,500 deaths. The US won many battles in Vietnam, but it lost the war. Try though it might to win the Korean war, going to the River Yalu in the hope of reuniting Korea, essentially it fought the Korean War to a stalemate that ended about on the 38th parallel – where it began – after which America’s military and political leaders said they would not fight another land war in Asia. John Foster Dulles, President Eisenhower’s Secretary of State, implied they would use atomic weapons in the future. But the US subsequently fought another massive war in Vietnam with immense quantities of conventional firepower – a war they eventually lost militarily. When they went into it they had no idea whatsoever in official Washington that they would lose so badly or that the war would last so long and cost so much.

Meanwhile, even while fighting in Vietnam, the American assumption, the basis on which they bought their equipment, was that they would fight principally in Europe against the Soviet Union. They spent hundreds of billions of dollars on equipment designed explicitly for European

conditions – for a nuclear war they never fought and could not fight, since it meant mutual destruction.

But even Wolfowitz was eventually aware of the problem: if you cannot predict you cannot plan, and that makes being a global superpower, which is extremely expensive, far more difficult. The US cannot spend without limit – that is impossible – and spending as much as required is the prerequisite, though scarcely sufficient, of being globally hegemonic. His earlier theories have less of a sense of limits. In 1992, he thought the US should and could exert its primacy everywhere, as if stalemate in Korea and defeat in Vietnam – much less the futile adventures, subsequently, in Iraq and Afghanistan – show that the United States does not have sufficient power to implement his grandiose notions based on theory rather than reality. He was still an ideologue of the Right but, by 2002, he had at least some sense of limits.

Nevertheless, Wolfowitz is an ideological, deductive theorist, who refuses to acknowledge the limits of America's power. But, as even he points out, America's military leaders did not predict World War Two (at least some of the crucial details), nor the collapse of the Soviet Union, in 1991, an alleged threat on which they spent countless billions preparing to fight a war. They failed to realize until the damage was done that they would not win the war against the Vietnamese Communists. There were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq – and the war there, Wolfowitz claimed, would be paid for by Iraqi oil revenues, which turned out not to be true. Iraq has been left mired in political shambles and corruption, and while some oil is being extracted, social and political conditions there prevent oil from being pumped to the extent it might. The US taxpayer paid for the cost of the war there – about a trillion dollars, excluding indirect costs such as veterans' benefits.

New priorities

Now US priorities have moved, at least for now, back to the Pacific, which, of course, means China. Before the Iraq War, the Bush Administration, particularly Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld, was eager to take on China. This is quixotic. China is far too powerful now to fight a war against; they are already far more powerful than Iran will ever be. The fact it is immense geographically is alone decisive; It also has nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them. A war with China would mean national suicide for the United States and it is highly unlikely to fight it, regardless who wants to fix their sights there.

That the Obama Administration is thinking of this is a reflection of how

it is still rooted in the Cold War mind-set. The Pentagon is divided on priorities; what they think important depends on the service, how they spend their budgets on weapons, and for what they think these weapons are best suited. Rivalry between the services remains a constant factor in assessing US strategic options, and it has always existed since World War Two. The only thing that the services have in common is the belief that US power should dominate the world. It is quixotic, but it also typical of the US military's shared illusions.

For a half-century or more, the US's budget and plans should have imposed priorities on its strategy, but its actions and behaviour have in fact been haphazardly guided by surprising events in much smaller, very poor nations, places – such as Korea and Vietnam, and then Iraq and Afghanistan – where, in fact, the rewards of success are relatively slight. It has always believed that the control of Europe and the confrontation with the Soviets was decisive for world power – the root of all evil was allegedly in Moscow. Essentially, it built arms oriented toward military success in Europe, with its cities and concentrated targets. But, instead, it used the arms developed for European conditions in Third World nations. It has been unable to correlate its actions with its resources and formal priorities, which have always been oriented to Europe.

There are many reasons for America's loss of control over its priorities and its getting into quagmires such as Vietnam, Korea, Iraq, and Afghanistan. It aided Iraq and Saddam Hussein, who subsequently became its enemy, against Iran, and the anti-Soviet fighting forces (mainly Islamic fundamentalists such as the Taliban) in Afghanistan. Irrational or not, the 'credibility' of its power – its ability to win once it set out to do so – was a factor of great importance in the Vietnam War. It wanted to maintain the image of US military power being invincible; it did not, and it came out looking pathetic. Partially linked to it was the American premiss that it could succeed anywhere. In Latin America it certainly prevailed in some cases but nowhere did it try so hard or expend such firepower as it did in Vietnam or lose so much, both in prestige and money. Some American officers, a growing minority, became profoundly discontented with the military culture, realizing something was going wrong; this is especially true of those officers who had seen wars first-hand – unlike most neo-cons, who are mainly intellectuals aloof from reality. But the vast majority of officers remain oblivious to such critical thinking.

The problem is that no nation – the US included – is able to rule the entire world, which is simply too big, and there are limits to any nation's power. Poorer, under-developed countries, where militarily important

resources are decentralized and where enemies take advantage of this fact, are very difficult to defeat. America's rulers, whether Republicans or Democrats, much less the Pentagon, simply refuse to acknowledge this fact. Only unquestioning, gung-ho types are promoted in the American military leadership, and so they repeat past errors and ask no fundamental questions.

There are many other reasons for America's failures besides the conformist nature of military leaders who maintain the same ambitions they did many generations ago, even though the distribution and nature of world power, both economically and militarily, has changed radically since 1945. For one thing, the US no longer has anything approaching a monopoly on nuclear weapons, a fact that alone is decisive, because many nations have already built nuclear bombs and the technology for doing so is much more accessible. More and more states can build or simply buy nuclear weapons.

Crucial, too, is the fact that the US local proxies, its allies in various Third World countries, are usually venal, alienating their local populations, wasting immense sums of American taxpayers' money through thievery and corruption of various sorts. Many in the military establishment have discussed how the failure of its dishonest local allies, or proxies, is an immense liability that is frequently a crucial cause of its military failures. It was surely crucial in Vietnam, and is decisive in many other places as well.

Daniel Byman, in a monograph for the US Army's Strategic Warfare Institute, 'Going to War With the Allies You Have', discusses the problem of US local allies who engage in 'blatant and brutal oppression such as the killing of moderate political opponents and human rights organization and church officials', making an outright victory in Latin America much more 'unlikely'. Its allies were inept, their soldiers 'do not want to fight', they have 'bad leadership' whose main concern is staying in power and keeping the flow of riches into their personal coffers. That means watching their own security services, which have the power to overthrow them, and in some cases keeping the opposition, whether Communist or revolutionary of one sort or another, sufficiently alive to have the Americans continue giving them aid – in a word, they often do not want to win lest they lose access to the American cornucopia.

Although it often believes they are acting to prevent the greater evil of Communism, the US works with monarchies, such as Saudi Arabia, that are characterized by 'corruption' and have poor intelligence and ineffective militaries. Byman's monograph is simply a catalogue of reasons for US failures. Its real significance is not that we don't know these facts, but that the US Army sponsored a study of why it

loses wars. Why the US Army's prestigious centre studied this crucial problem, we cannot say for certain, but the Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College is the main place for the Army's intellectuals, and at least some Army officers are probably tired of pursuing a losing strategy again and again.

Lt. Col. Donald D. Davis, after going all over Afghanistan in 2010 and 2011, concluded that Karzai's government is not making progress. It is too corrupt and interested in perpetuating its own power. High Pentagon officials naturally deny these shortcomings, but others – journalists especially – have already discussed the catalogue of Karzai's failures. It is a very familiar account of America's contradiction; it relies on proxies who are totally venal and unreliable to attain victory. But most ultimately fail.

A National Intelligence Estimate in December 2011 – which was compiled mainly by the CIA – came essentially to the same conclusion as Davis. The Taliban will win by simply waiting out the Americans.

The inevitability of large American military expenditures

The Pentagon's vast spending on arms has proven insufficient to win military and political victories in innumerable nations where the US has made the effort to prevail. But its vast budget at least creates many jobs and helps maintain the American economy. The so-called defence industry has enormous influence in the House and Senate, which often forces the Defence Department to maintain their expenditures for weapons systems – including those that do not work – made in their districts and employing local labour, who then vote for the incumbents.

The Cold War was nominally over when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, but the Cold War budget, ever-higher military spending, has been institutionalized since 1950, and jobs in many areas of the US depend on them. State-by-state breakdowns on defence industry employment are regularly issued: Kansas, Washington and Texas lead the pack. Even in 1950 the US, in the famous, now declassified National Security Council 68 paper, authored largely under Paul Nitze, explicitly adapted 'military Keynesianism' as a way of creating prosperity, allocating money for military expenses and running deficits that Congress would not legislate for peaceful purposes. This cynical process under President Harry Truman's Democratic Administration was forced on the Congress because the Republicans, under Senator Robert Taft of Ohio, wanted to balance the budget, but they were also afraid of being thought 'soft on Communism' if they did not allocate the funds that Truman wanted for the Pentagon, Marshall Plan, and the Truman Doctrine. It worked, and the Democratic

decision was monumental; it caused military expenses to become integral to the American economy thereafter. They became, from this time onwards, an institutionalized aspect of the entire American economy, and also the single most important factor creating the immense debt it has today of about \$18 trillion.

The World is changing

Both Europe and the United States are in crisis. For the sake of space, I do not focus so much on America's economic problems, save that its vast military spending is the main cause of its colossal deficit. Sooner or later it must confront the fact that, if it does not reduce this debt, it may wreck the international role of the US dollar.

The European crisis is both economic and political. And the Germans are trying to use their economic power to resurrect the traditional political power they had before Germany lost two European wars. They will fail, probably, because the Merkel Government hurts not only Greeks, Spaniards, and other citizens of European nations, but also Germans – who may vote against Merkel.

We are entering a turbulent period both in the US and Europe!

The logo for the Communication Workers Union, featuring a stylized graphic of three curved lines on the left and the text "COMMUNICATION WORKERS UNION" in a bold, sans-serif font.

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