The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Unrealpolitik in Russia and China

By Dominique Moisi

January 10, 2014

In her recent book on the origins of World War I, The War That Ended Peace, Margaret MacMillan concludes that the only thing one can say with certainty about its causes is that leadership matters. No one really wanted war, but no one knew how to oppose it, because great statesmen like Germany's Otto von Bismarck, whose self-restraint preserved peace in Europe for decades, were missing in Europe in 1914. A similar leadership void has become palpable in recent behavior by Russia and China.

In the run-up to World War I, political and military leaders failed to grasp how industrial production and mass transportation had altered the character of warfare. The American Civil War should have served as a warning for Europeans. But a Europe that considered itself the center of the world, exporting its rivalries to Africa and Asia in the name of a "civilizing mission," was utterly incapable of paying attention to the harsh lessons of the New World.

Today, neither President Vladimir Putin nor Chinese President Xi Jinping seem to have learned those lessons, either. In Ukraine, Russia must choose what kind of relationship it wants to have with Europe. If Ukraine returns to the Kremlin's orbit, whether through direct

reintegration or some kind of "Finlandization," Russia will end up reenacting an old European problem: like France from 1643 to 1815 and Wilhelmine Germany, it will be both "too much" for its neighbors and "not enough" for its ambitions.

Leaving aside why Russia should want to pay so much money to sustain a Ukrainian regime that is even more corrupt and dysfunctional than its own, Ukraine, with a territory greater than France and a population of 45 million, is the de facto linchpin of Europe's geopolitical equilibrium. Unlike Poland three times in the 18th century, there can be no question of partition, with western Ukraine joining Europe and the country's east returning to Russia. As a result, Ukraine's civilizational choice — between a democratic European Union and an autocratic Russia — will necessarily have major strategic consequences for the entire European continent.

The problem that China faces in the South China Sea — and now in its airspace — is of a similar nature. Is China, too, losing the sense of restraint that characterized its foreign policy until recently?

The Chinese seem now to be displaying an impatience that is contrary to their country's long-term interests. China's heightened global status is obvious and recognized by all. But where is the serenity of a great power so confident in the superiority of its civilization, and so secure in its future, that it bides its time?

By flaunting its hegemonic regional ambitions, China has managed to unify against it countries as diverse as Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines. These countries now want more than ever America's continuing presence as an Asian power. Indeed, transcending their historical enmity with Japan, they tend to show more understanding for the rhetoric of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government — and its new and more muscular defense policy — than for China's recent demonstration of force.

It is sometimes said that history teaches us nothing, for it contains everything. Yet the teachings of classical diplomacy are probably more useful today than they were in the 20th century. The age of grand ideologies is behind us; an era marked by strict calculation of interest beckons. In the interim, war may have changed more than diplomacy — and probably for the worse. Our weapons' destructive power has peaked at a time when the "enemy" is becoming more diffuse. How do you make war on instability? How do you fight an adversary that disappears into civil society?

Even if technological progress has changed the diplomat's job, the rules of the diplomatic game remain fundamentally the same. Success presupposes an understanding of the interests and perceptions of one's counterparts, as well as an innate sense of moderation and self-limitation, something that both Russia and China seem to be lacking.

By contrast, one may wonder whether U.S. President Barack Obama should not also learn from Bismarck — but from Bismarck the Iron Chancellor, who united Germany behind Prussia. Is he demonstrating enough toughness and clarity of vision in his policy toward Iran — or, even more to the point, toward Syria? Cold-blooded realpolitik, as Bismarck showed, is the best way to keep the peace.

Dominique Moisi is senior adviser at The French Institute for International Affairs (IFRI)

and a professor at L'Institut d'études politiques de Paris (Sciences Po). He is the author of The Geopolitics of Emotion: How Cultures of Fear, Humiliation, and Hope are Reshaping the World. © Project Syndicate.

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/01/10/unrealpolitik-in-russia-and-china-a30948