

Winds of Change to Winds of War

Written by Anil Sigdel

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ANIL SIGDEL, NOV 9 2014

Psychological approaches explain that leaders often discount new information that does not fit with their existing beliefs. Only something exceptional can make them change their mind. The fall of the Berlin Wall was one such event. It signified the end of East-West Cold War thinking and opened up new pathways in American foreign policy. The dismantling of the Soviet Union was a more than welcome global power shift from a western perspective. But how about 25 years later?

Russian President Vladimir Putin is consistently behaving in a way that indicates that he is embarking on a path of revisionism. Is this not enough to change the prior beliefs of American leaders or the Europeans? Or are they waiting for something more significant to happen? In this case the psychological explanations do not say much. Employing the rational choice approach might be more helpful.

The rational choice approach assumes that people pursue what is in their best interest. And, even though today there are states, or leaders or state institutions, who frustrate others with their destabilizing acts, neither the world community nor any individual state is predisposed to responding militarily. This is likely due to the optimal rational response of inaction.

As a consequence, we keep on finding alternative explanations that keep us going with our lives. For instance, when Russia invaded Crimea, many prominent leaders were heard saying that Crimea for historical reasons is an exception, therefore, we should turn a blind eye to it. Some cited Putin's need for domestic legitimacy for which he put up the "show" of Russian empire's revival. Then comes the turn of the other parts of eastern Ukraine. Who knows what come next? If you listen to the American commentators with Polish connections, the worst days are sure to come. However, most experts do not buy yet that Putin will really push it with NATO member states.

Similarly, China's growing military might in East Asia is making its neighbours wary. In India, where the memory of the humiliating defeat in the 1962 India-China war is still fresh, the news of Chinese incursions at the border in the North regularly jolts. So much so that when the Chinese President Xi Jinping visited India recently, PLA troops crossed the border into Ladakh region. Commentators are divided on whether it was a deliberate act or not. Indian PM Modi, characteristically, did bluntly tell Xi Jinping about the possible repercussions of such actions, but of course that was it.

If we look at the border issue with Pakistan in the Jammu and Kashmir region, a war of words has been the hallmark of India's foreign policy, even frequent news of soldiers being killed or beheaded irritates the Indian establishment and citizens alike.

Lessons learned from these issues are both good and bad. States seem to avoid military conflict as much as possible, but some seem hell-bent in either provoking conflict or striving for domination. Just 25 years ago with the fall of Berlin Wall some had believed in the definitive victory of liberalism, and it's package of freedom, democracy and peace. However, as of today, negative prospects loom large.

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