



## History Repeating

Will the 2040s be the most dangerous time in human history? Or is predicting future calamities a fool's errand and likely to be as accurate as a broken clock?

In his recent book on the history of calamities, *Doom: the Politics of Catastrophe*, historian Niall Ferguson argues that catastrophes such as pandemics, wars and natural disasters are effectively impossible to predict and occur entirely at random. Certainly, a single theory that explains everything and thus can predict anything is clearly false (if for no other reason than the fact that the ability to predict something accurately means it can be avoided, thus disproving the theory). Forecasters can predict the rise and fall of economic activity, but economics interacts with other aspects of life such as politics, technological change, climatic patterns and random occurrences like volcanoes and earthquakes. Thus, economic models are not great at predicting recessions, much less more dramatic events like a war, pandemic or famine.

On the other hand, rigorous forecasting models might help predict the *risk* of something occurring. In my upcoming book "Big Wars" I predict that there will be a heightened risk of a big war in the 2040s because various trends point in that direction. That does not guarantee one will. It will certainly depend on a host of unknowable factors from global trade relations to whether a particular future world leader more resembles a Hitler or a Mandela. But if the weatherman predicts rain, it's wise to carry an umbrella.

Take one indicator. Historian Gwynne Dyer identifies that there have been six "world wars" in the past four centuries (effectively since the emergence of the modern nation state). His definition of a world war is a war in which all the great powers of the time are involved. By this definition, the Thirty Years War (1618-48), the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-14), the Seven Years War (1758-63), The Napoleonic Wars (1792-1815), World War I (1914-18) and World War II (1936-45) were all world wars. Dyer notes that these wars have tended to be about fifty years apart. His explanation is that

after a world war the resulting peace treaty reflects the power dynamics at the time (who won, who lost, what the winners want and what the losers can tolerate). However, after a while, international power dynamics change, and the old peace treaties no longer reflect the new realities. The disgruntled seek to change the status quo, normally via a war, and the international pecking order is reshuffled after the next peace treaty. It normally takes about fifty years for this process to unfold.

For example, the various parties involved in the brutal and drawn out Thirty Years War fought themselves to a stalemate, so the ensuing Treaty of Westphalia recognised each states sovereign right to exist and that there should be a balance of power to ensure the survival of each of them. Fast forward fifty years and the ruling dynasty in France was set to inherit the throne of Spain, which would have created a European superpower that could disturb the balance of power. War ensued, Britain sort of won, France kind of lost, and the thrones of France and Spain were kept separate in the resulting peace treaty.

There are some problems with the theory. What about that long gap between 1815 and 1914, the short gap between World War I and II and the fact there has been no world war since 1945? These discrepancies might be the exceptions that prove the rule. There was a reshuffling of the international deck in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century (the unifications of Germany and Italy were recognised, and the declining France and Ottoman Empire lost territory) but this occurred via a series of short, smaller wars, not one big world war. After World War I the peace treaty of Versailles was so draconian that it took only twenty years before the international system was out of whack and another war broke out. After World War II the international system reflected the power dynamics of a bipolar world with two nuclear superpowers. But by the late 1980s one of these superpowers was on the decline, governed by a bankrupt ideology and desperately hanging on to half of Europe and its global relevance. A reshuffling of the deck occurred (the liberation of Eastern Europe and the breakup of the Soviet Union), but this time it was effected through a drawn out Cold War, not a big world war.

If international power dynamics do periodically get out of whack, about every fifty years or so, then the next scheduled reshuffle will be the 2040s, fifty years since the end of the Cold War. There is no shortage of possible abnormalities within the current international system that might trigger such a reshuffle (the disputed borders of Russia and China, Taiwan's ongoing dubious international status, emerging new economic powers, the fact that three declining powers have vetos on decisions in the UN security council). Of the last eight international reshuffles, six resulted in world wars, two in lesser levels of violence. Thus, there is no guarantee we will see another big war this century, but it would be wise to carry an umbrella.

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