

Stumbling on the verge of catastrophe? The media and the transforming world order

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By LSE MsC student Luca Bertuzzi

An [article](#) published on *Le Monde Diplomatique* of last month (September 2016) reports the alarming fact that the United States is preparing for a major confrontation with a World Power. An alarm bell that has curiously passed undetected in the mainstream media.

In his article, Micheal Klare stressed that US military establishment is increasingly convinced that a conflict either against Russia over Eastern Europe or against China over the North Pacific Ocean is likely “to explode at any moment”. Washington’s new defence budget also reflects this bellicose tone, referring to “the return of rivalry amongst the Great Powers”.

Although it might appear such talk is a superficial show of strength towards the Chinese and Russian military establishments, the media’s indifference is by no means justified. Particularly given that in military strategy once one is convinced a war is inevitable, the logical consequence is, according to Clausewitz’s principles of war, to attack first.

Indeed a journalist should not limit himself to reporting an event, but also furnish to the audience with a broader background of information. In this case, an historical perspective can be drawn by making a parallel between the current geopolitical situation and the prelude to the First World War.

The United States is the declining hegemonic power, formerly assumed by Great Britain, and sees its position threatened by the rising revisionist China resembling Germany’s role before WW1. Japan, the major ally of the US in the area, has lost her regional dominance just like France had become the second rank continental power. The situation is made even more complex by Russian revisionism on the post-Cold War international order.



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As Christopher Clark effectively proved in *The Sleepwalkers*, the escalation that led to WWI was caused by a series of short-term shocks that encouraged the decision-makers to take uncompromising stands, whose final outcome was the worst disaster of contemporary history. No one would take a step back believing that, if the other did not cave in, then war was truly inevitable. In this way inevitability became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Despite the fact that the opacity of those times is not replicable today, there is the real risk that, being constantly bombarded with information, we miss facts that could have a huge impact on our lives. In other words, leading the attention away from core issues could be –or already is- the new censorship.

That is probably what Micheal Klare means when he describes the media space as “saturated” with other problems such as Brexit and international terrorism. This is even more worrying since it is not a deliberate attempt to hide information to the public, but rather the consequence of how the media system works.

As predicted by Schumpeter there is a deep division between the rich-of-content elitist press and the media of mass circulation mainly dominated by entertainment. Moreover, media logic pretends full concentration on the immediacy, hence easily overlooking long-term trends.

Therefore it is up to the journalist, as the ultimate decider of what is newsworthy, to decide what the most pertinent issues are and to find the correct balance between information and accessibility. Even more so since the aforementioned media logic of eternal “presentism” is incompatible with the historical perspective required by international news.

Applying the latter to the present day would mean becoming aware that the West is –in relative terms- set on the track of a slow but inevitable decline. Although still a model under many aspects the rest of the world is not going to supinely accept any kind of dominance anymore, whether political, economical or cultural -even though the latter is slier.

As Martin Wight provocatively noted, when the status-quo is convenient, one does not hesitate to define it as “fair”. However, although some people see International Relations as a zero-sum game, modern large-scale conflicts proved able to generate just losers, especially for what concerns the civil population. This became undeniable since Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The Western Europeans were able to draw this lesson from the two world wars that bled their continent white. Afterwards they had to accept the fact that Europe was not the centre of the world anymore. Now it is the turn of the United States (1) to come to terms with the new polycentric world order that is taking shape.

Whether Washington will do it peacefully or not it will depend also on the way Western media (2) will represent what is “fair”. If a crisis comes, journalists should make the public aware of what is at stake so that civil society can adequately respond when a decision has to be taken. During World War I a loud minority was able to impose its will on a silent majority. Responsible journalists need to make sure that that will not happen again.

By Luca Bertuzzi

- The author refers only to the United States to avoid a major conflict for a number of reasons. First, Washington is still by far the most overwhelming military power of the world, thus could be tempted to annihilate a rising power “before it’s too late”. Second, there is little, if any, freedom of the press in the aforementioned revisionist power so it would be of little sense to address their media. Last but not least, there is no other way to avoid open conflict with a revisionist power but conceding part of your privileged position. However, that could be very difficult to explain to the public.
- The reference is not made merely toward US media in the opinion that allied countries could have a decisive influence on the decision makers in Washington.
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