NEW YORK – Karl Marx famously wrote that history repeats itself, “the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.” Yet when we look around nowadays, we can’t help but wonder whether tragedy will be followed by yet more tragedy. Here we are, at the centenary of the outbreak of World War I, and we find ourselves surrounded by cascading violence, duplicity, and cynicism of the very sort that brought the world to disaster in 1914. And the world regions involved then are involved again.

WWI began with a mindset, one based on the belief that military means could resolve pressing social and political issues in Central Europe. A century earlier, the German military theorist Carl von Clausewitz had written that war is “a continuation of political intercourse carried on with other means.” Enough politicians in 1914 agreed.

Yet WWI proved Clausewitz tragically wrong for modern times. War in the industrial age is tragedy, disaster, and devastation; it solves no political problems. War is a continuation not of politics, but of political failure.

WWI ended four imperial regimes: the Prussian (Hohenzollern) dynasty, the Russian
(Romanov) dynasty, the Turkish (Ottoman) dynasty, and the Austro-Hungarian (Habsburg) dynasty. The war not only caused millions of deaths; it also left a legacy of revolution, state bankruptcy, protectionism, and financial collapse that set the stage for Hitler’s rise, World War II, and the Cold War.

We are still reeling today. Territory that was once within the multi-ethnic, multi-state, multi-religious Ottoman Empire is again engulfed in conflict and war, stretching from Libya to Palestine-Israel, Syria, and Iraq. The Balkan region remains sullen and politically divided, with Bosnia and Herzegovina unable to institute an effective central government and Serbia deeply jolted by the 1999 NATO bombing and the contentious independence of Kosovo in 2008, over its bitter opposition.

The former Russian Empire is in growing turmoil as well, a kind of delayed reaction to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, with Russia attacking Ukraine and violence continuing to erupt in Georgia, Moldova, and elsewhere. In East Asia, tensions between China and Japan – echoes of the last century – are a growing danger.

As was the case a century ago, vain and ignorant leaders are pushing into battle without clear purpose or realistic prospects for resolution of the underlying political, economic, social, or ecological factors that are creating the tensions in the first place. The approach of too many governments is to shoot first, think later.

Take the US. Its basic strategy has been to send troops, drones, or bombers to any place that would threaten America’s access to oil, harbors Islamic fundamentalists, or otherwise creates problems – say, piracy off the coast of Somalia – for US interests. Hence, US troops, the CIA, drone missiles, or US-backed armies are engaged in fighting across a region stretching from the Sahel in West Africa, through Libya, Somalia, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and beyond.

All of this military activity costs hundreds of thousands of lives and trillions of dollars. But, rather than solving a single underlying problem, the chaos is growing, threatening an ever-widening war.

Russia is not handling itself any better. For a while, Russia backed international law, rightly complaining that the US and NATO were violating international law in Kosovo,
Iraq, Syria, and Libya.

But then President Vladimir Putin took aim at Ukraine, fearing that the country was about to drop into Europe’s pocket. Suddenly, he was silent about obeying international law. His government then illegally annexed Crimea and is fighting an increasingly brutal guerrilla war in eastern Ukraine, through proxies and, it now appears, direct engagement of Russian forces.

In this context, the fate of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 is terrifying not only for its brutality, but also in its intimation of a world gone mad. At the time of this writing, those who aimed and fired the missile remain unknown, though Russian-backed rebels in eastern Ukraine are the most likely culprits. What is certain, however, is that the violence unleashed by Putin’s war on Ukraine has claimed hundreds of innocent lives and brought the world a step closer to disaster.

There are no heroes among the great powers today. Cynicism is rife on all sides. The US effectively violates international law by resorting to force without United Nations sanction. It sends drones and secret forces into sovereign countries without their approval. It spies relentlessly on friend and foe alike.

Russia does the same, inflicting death on Ukraine, Georgia, and other neighbors. The only constants in all of this are the easy resort to violence and the lies that inevitably accompany it.

There are four major differences between now and the world of 1914. For starters, we have since lived through two disastrous wars, a Great Depression, and a Cold War. We have had the opportunity to learn a thing or two about the stupidity and uselessness of organized collective violence. Second, the next global war, in this nuclear age, would almost surely end the world.

The third major difference is that today, with our wondrous technologies, we have every opportunity to solve the underlying problems of poverty, hunger, displacement, and environmental degradation that create so many dangerous tinderboxes.

Finally, we have international law, if we choose to use it. The belligerents in Europe and
Asia 100 years ago could not turn to the UN Security Council and UN General Assembly, venues where diplomacy, rather than war, can be the true continuation of politics. We are blessed with the possibility to construct peace through a global institution that was founded to help ensure that global war would never recur.

As citizens of the world, our job now is to demand peace through diplomacy, and through global, regional, and national initiatives to address the scourges of poverty, disease, and environmental degradation. On this hundredth anniversary of one of the greatest disasters of human history, let us follow tragedy not by farce or more tragedy, but by the triumph of cooperation and decency.

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