

Fast forward 10 years ... and the



By Niall Ferguson

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EVER since the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, pessimists have been asking themselves when the next cold war will begin, and who the new enemy will be. But what if it's cold wars, plural, and enemies, plural, we should be worrying about?

A world with one potential nuclear conflict was scary enough. It would be a whole lot scarier if in future there were multiple nuclear rivalries — four or more regional cold wars, each with the potential to end in devastating missile exchanges. Unfortunately, that is precisely what the future may hold if the 1970 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) becomes a dead letter, and nuclear weapons are acquired by powers indifferent to both the post-Nagasaki taboo against their use and the cold war logic of deterrence based on “mutually assured destruction”.

Why does it suddenly seem so hard to stop Iran from going nuclear? The Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is behaving with such recklessness that it ought to be easy. Last October, he called for Israel to be “wiped off the map”. It was, he told cheering Indonesian students last week, a “tyrannical regime that one day will be destroyed”. Simultaneously, Ahmadinejad has trumpeted Iran’s “right” to pursue its nuclear ambitions, barely disguising his country’s intention to move from energy into weaponry.

Iran is the world’s biggest sponsor of terrorist organisations. It openly aspires to exploit the instability of Iraq to establish hegemony — if not a new Persian empire — in the Gulf region and beyond. If you need an illustration of the term “rogue regime”, then look no further. Yet the West — what’s left of it — seems paralysed, watching Ahmadinejad with the same appalled fascination that a large and docile cow might regard a rearing cobra.

It is, of course, always dangerous to draw analogies with the 1930s. Too many bad decisions have been made over the years on the basis of facile parallels — between Hitler and Nasser, between Hitler and Saddam Hussein. As a friend’s father wittily observed during the run-up to the invasion of Iraq: “It’s the 1930s all over again, all over again.”

Still, in one respect, Ahmadinejad really has taken a leaf out of the Führer’s book. He has discovered the counter-intuitive truth that it works to talk aggressively before you have acquired weapons of mass destruction.

Hitler did this. He made recklessly belligerent speeches in 1938, threatening war if he was not handed the German-speaking regions of Czechoslovakia; he took much the same view of the legitimacy of the Czech state as Ahmadinejad

does of Israel’s right to exist. It was all the most tremendous bluff; we now know how unprepared Germany was for war at that time. In particular, Hitler talked up the capability of the Luftwaffe, curdling the blood of British politicians with visions of London flattened by German bombing raids. This was fantasy in 1938.

Yet sabre-rattling threats can work even if they are bluff. The key, as Ahmadinejad has seen, is that weak opponents are unnerved when they fear they are dealing with a madman. In this respect, the long and nutty letter sent by Ahmadinejad to President Bush last week was exemplary. (Was it, I wonder,

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written in green ink?) I particularly admired the many references to “the prophet Jesus Christ (PBÜH)” (Peace Be Upon Him).

Four years ago, George W Bush would have binned such drivel with a snort of “WBUH” (War Be Upon Him) and told his generals to launch air strikes on Iran’s nuclear facilities, to activate special forces already in Iran and to put Iranian opposition leaders on stand-by for regime change. In those days, as Saddam Hussein found to his cost, talking tough when the WMD weren’t ready was a suicidal strategy.

But those days are gone. President Bush is

here are cold wars everywhere

now almost as unpopular a president as Richard Nixon or Jimmy Carter at the nadirs of their political fortunes. The gaggle of retired generals who recently denounced Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld sounded more like mouth-pieces for the Joint Chiefs of Staff than yesterday's men grumbling from the sidelines.

Not only is domestic and military support lacking for any pre-emptive action against Tehran. International support is close to non-existent. The Europeans, predictably, favour the United Nations route and the seldom-effective stick of sanctions. But the Chinese and

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Russians will ensure that any such stick is made of bamboo, if not balsa wood. And the last dismal days of Tony Blair portend the end of the special relationship.

As if these weaknesses were not sufficient, Mr Bush has added one of his own. By agreeing to help India with its nuclear energy programme, despite India's not being a signatory of the NPT, the President has undermined the very principle of the treaty. It is precisely the prospect of assistance with the development of nuclear energy that is supposed to encourage countries to sign the NPT. If India can get help anyway, why bother signing?

In short, it seems highly probable that nothing will be done this year, next year or the year after to stop Iran's nuclear programme. Sure, maybe a miracle will happen and the Iranian people will get rid of the madman and the mullahs. But I'm not holding my breath.

Fast forward to 2016. What does the world look like? One plausible scenario is that it will be a world of multiple mini-cold wars, with pairs of nuclear powers eyeball to eyeball in nearly every region. In Asia, there is already a cold war between India and Pakistan, though they seem to have entered a period of détente. Ten years from now, there could be several more such potentially deadly double-acts.

Japan could quite quickly acquire nuclear weapons if it felt insufficiently protected by the United States against China. South Korea might do the same to meet the threat from North Korea. And might a decoupled Europe start to build up the Anglo-French nuclear capability as a response to energy-blackmail from Russia? The key cold war of the future, however, would be the one in the Middle East, with Israel on one side and Iran on the other.

There are those who say that such a world could still be peaceful. The acquisition of nuclear weapons can make a rogue regime reasonable, they argue, since — that old line from Spiderman — “With great power comes great responsibility”.

In a recent lecture at Harvard, the Nobel Prize-winning economist and nuclear theorist Thomas Schelling argued that three things had prevented nuclear weapons from being used in anger over the past 60 years: the Non-Proliferation Treaty; the informal taboo on their use; and the fear of retaliation. That was why the Bomb was not dropped during the Korean War,

and that was why both superpowers invested heavily in European conventional forces, which would have been redundant in a nuclear exchange. Nuclear weapons give their possessors influence, Schelling concluded, precisely through not being used.

Yet there is no guarantee that this logic will continue to apply in a world of multiple cold wars. For one thing, the world enjoyed 60 years without nuclear war partly out of sheer good luck, as any student of the Cuban Missile Crisis knows. In a world of multiple cold wars, the risks of miscalculation are proportionally multiplied.

For another, Mr Ahmadinejad does not look to me like the kind of man who bothers about (Western) taboos or fears (Israeli) retaliation. On the contrary, he is a devotee of the Hidden Twelfth Imam, who Shi'ites believe will return to earth as the Mehdi (Messiah) for a final decisive showdown with the Forces of Evil. Among the members of the Mehdi's entourage will be none other than Jesus Christ (PBUH). After that, it will be the End of Days.

When Ahmadinejad addressed the United Nations last September, this is how he concluded: “O mighty Lord, I pray to you to hasten the emergence of your last repository, the promised one, that perfect and pure human being, the one that will fill this world with justice and peace.”

To a millenarian, mutually assured destruction is just another word for the long-awaited Apocalypse. And that, in essence, is why we don't want Iran to have the Bomb. But are we doomed to grasp this only when the mushroom clouds are rising over Tel Aviv and Tehran?

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