

2014, Learn from 1914



“If the assassination of an Archduke of Austria was the spark that set off World War I, a collision between Chinese and Japanese vessels in the East China Sea could be the immediate cause of World War III”

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We are in the centenary year of World War I. A torrent of commemorations and commentaries is pouring out in the news media on international security in 1914 and 2014.

The central thought overhanging this surge of opinions about the Great War is whether lessons from that tragic conflict, which cost over 37 million lives, have been learnt or forgotten. Are we wiser with hindsight to avert arms races and strategic brinkmanship that plunged humanity in 1914 into what H.G. Wells ironically called “the war that will end all wars”?

Far from remaining a fanciful academic exercise, policymakers have jumped into the fray of drawing historical analogies between the international conditions on the eve of World War I and the current state of play. Japan’s Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, set off a firestorm last month by warning against “military expansion” in Asia and comparing contemporary relations between China and Japan with those between Germany and Britain before the breakout of World War I.

The parallel was striking because China and Japan are presently engaged in a tense standoff over historical wrongs and contested territories. They are building up their military muscle with a wary eye on each other’s capabilities and intentions. Narrow nationalism, which has stoked anti-Japanese sentiment in China and fear of Chinese hegemony in Japan, is also on the rise and hardening stereotypes on both sides.

Like Germany and Britain one hundred years ago, China and Japan are two of the most powerful economies of our times. They are heavyweights wielding enormous material resources and surpluses, capable of enlisting influential foreign allies from their respective camps if their cold face-off escalates into a hot war. A Sino-Japanese war today will be far more global and devastating than the first Sino-Japanese war of 1894 over Korea, which did not spiral into a wider planetary conflict.

The insecurity experienced by British elites at the turn of the 20th Century vis-à-vis Germany’s expanding naval fleet and Kaiser Wilhelm’s challenge to the former’s colonial possessions has eerie parallels to Chinese anxieties about Prime Minister Abe’s “normalisation” of Japan as a military power. Should Japan continue shedding its pacifist constitution and bolstering its fighting capacities, the already alarming increase in Chinese defence expenditure will skyrocket in order to sustain Beijing’s vast lead in conventional and nuclear superiority over its Asian neighbours.

All it takes in such a trigger-ready ambience is one incident that can set off a mad frenzy. If the assassination of an Archduke of Austria was the spark that set off World War I, a collision between Chinese and Japanese vessels in the East China Sea or of Chinese and Japanese fighter jets in China’s provocative Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) could be the immediate cause of World War III.

Prime Minister Abe is a keen student of history. He made the 1914 parallel after pondering over how high levels of economic interdependence between Germany and Britain could not deter war between them. The trade and investment volumes achieved between these two European powers prior to World War I were record-breaking for that era and were part and parcel of what historians call the “first age of globalisation” from 1880 to 1913.

Yet, the strategic dilemmas and nationalistic paranoia triumphed over rational economic logic. Could the same happen to China and Japan today, which has an average annual bilateral trade of over \$350 billion?

In 1909, the British intellectual Norman Angell wrote a seminal work titled *The Great Illusion*, arguing that war between industrialised great powers of Europe was futile and illogical because it would derail the gravy train of economic interdependence and impose unbearable losses on the protagonists. Although Angell did not predict that countries enjoying robust economic partnership would avoid war, his normative prescription was that they ought to avoid it for the sake of the symbiotic economic stakes binding them.

Sadly, Germany and Britain (as well as their respective allies) fell for the “great illusion” that conquest and territorial aggrandisement were beneficial and dragged humanity into a terribly costly war. Are China and Japan following suit now by abandoning their intertwined economic fates and allowing inflamed patriotic passions and emotions to prevail over cold reasoning? The Chinese government reacted vehemently to Prime Minister Abe’s 2014 reminiscences by countering that Japan is trying to obfuscate the crimes it committed just before and during World War II (1939-1945) by harking to an earlier World War. Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi insisted that a “more relevant history lesson” was Japan’s aggression against China and other Asian countries from the 1930s onward.

As if in repartee to China’s attempt to shift the historical quarrel from World War I to World War II, the President of the Philippines, Benigno Aquino, has exhorted Western powers to forestall China’s Nazi-style aggression against Southeast Asian neighbours. In comments that caught global attention, President Aquino urged his Western allies to firmly resist Chinese military expansion and bullying in Southeast Asia and save relatively weak nations like the Philippines from being gobbled up the way Adolf Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia in 1938.

To President Aquino, the acquiescence by the US and other international actors to China’s forcible occupation of the disputed Scarborough Shoal in 2012 is a reminder of British and French policies of “appeasement” of Hitler that only whetted his insatiable appetite for more land and culminated in World War II. China’s unrealistic claims like the “cow’s tongue line” in Southeast Asian territorial waters, and revisionist maps showing a Greater China of imperial legacy do carry troubling shades of Hitler’s lebensraum strategy of seeking spaces for Germany’s “natural development”.

Even as a plethora of intra-state wars rage across the world from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan to Colombia and the Congo, classic inter-state wars are becoming rare in the 21st century. Destructive energies of nationalistic elites have been channeled into financing and arming proxies in so-called internal “civil wars”.

Yet, the chance of direct war between major powers cannot be ruled out with confidence due to the earthshaking power transition happening from West and East. If we have entered the “Asian century”, the need of the hour is to nurture cooperative regional institutional mechanisms to forestall today’s Asia from repeating the follies of Europe of either 1914 or 1939.

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