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War Risks in Asia – Deciphering 1914

100 years after those fateful bullets at Sarajevo, the metaphor of “1914” is routinely used to depict war risks in East Asia. However, tempting as it is, this necessarily falls short without a clarification of what is meant by “1914”. Only then can the relevance of the analogy in preventing escalation be meaningfully discussed.

By Jonas Grätz, Michael Haas, Prem Mahadevan & Martin Zapfe

It was Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe who in January 2014 used the Swiss Alpine resort of Davos to send a warning to China: “We must (...) restrain military expansion in Asia, which could otherwise go unchecked.”¹ Using a series of allusions that clearly invoked the memory of World War I, Abe was only one of many politicians and pundits who invoked the analogy of July 1914 to warn against a similar escalation in Asia. Yet what do they mean by it? What are the most serious risks for war in East Asia, and what does the analogy of “1914” tell us about possible steps to avert such a catastrophe?

The outbreak of war in 1914 has been attributed to numerous causes, and generations of historians have found it difficult to disentangle them. Indeed, few debates in the discipline are as complex and laden with history. However, there are three main discourses that are routinely invoked: The first is that of nations and their leaders “sleepwalking” into the conflict, an argument recently reprised in

the influential work by Christopher Clark. The second explanation focuses on military rationales that generated uncontrollable political dynamics. The third routinely is linked to Fritz Fischer’s 1961 classic “Griff nach der Weltmacht”: That war was the result of one single power – in

KEY POINTS

- With regard to Asia, most possible causes of war entailed in the “1914” analogy fall short
- If one analogy is adequate, it is the danger entailed in the rise of one state against the perceived encirclement by status quo countries
- In the face of this development, technical policy recommendations face limitations; what is needed instead is a challenging conflict transformation
- This transformation requires a 19th century balancing of interests with a “saturated” China at its core

this case Imperial Germany – seeking dominance and a hegemonic position, thereby bringing about war, if not deliberately then surely as a direct consequence of its recklessness.

In the following, we will argue that the first two causes of war implied by the analogy of “1914” are less relevant today than is commonly believed, and that it is, ironically, a variant of the third, last, and perhaps most controversial paradigm that seems to best capture the threat to peace in East Asia. It still seems possible to diffuse the tension resulting from this development; the overall trend, however, does not promise a peaceful future.



Vessels from the China Maritime Surveillance and the Japan Coast Guard are seen near disputed islands, called Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China, in the East China Sea, 10 September 2013. *Reuters/Kyodo*

No sleepwalking

In his 2012 bestseller on the outbreak of the war, Christopher Clark rejects oversimplified explanations resting on – and looking for – a single culprit state with a smoking gun. Clark concludes that European statesmen resembled sleepwalkers: “(W)atchful but unseeing, (...) blind to the reality of the horror they were about to bring into the world.”² It is not, says Clark, that they were generally unaware of the catastrophic magnitude a continental war might have. Yet the mental divide between knowing the theoretical danger and knowing – feeling – the real cost of war was decisive against a geopolitical background conducive to war.

It is difficult to ascertain the danger of political sleepwalking in Asia in 2014. Again, the geopolitical background is set: a number of states in the region face off in zero-sum conflicts grouped around questions of sovereignty and, even more dangerous, history. All of these conflicts involve China, and many of them are centred on Chinese claims. The very fact that most public statements of the respective leaders warn against escalation and see war as a real possibility cannot by itself be judged as proof of a sufficient awareness of escalatory dangers. War, in 1914, after all, was a distinct possibility and a reality of life accepted by most leaders. The critical question is whether today political and military elites in the competing states consider military operations a viable option – that is, potentially effective, and limitable in intensity and scope.

In a region so burdened by its history, and with fresh memories of brutal expansionist warfare, it is reasonable to assume that leaders “feel” the danger of war spinning out of control. In addition, the security presence of the US – like China, a nuclear power – has a stabilizing effect: Chinese conflicts with South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines and Thailand, due to varying security obligations involving the US, feature rather low thresholds of escalation. This should deter unilateral moves and clarify Chinese calculations. If one adds the immense political and media attention now focused on the region, it is un-

likely that any regional leader would, in any real sense, “sleepwalk” into a conflict – the risks are clear, the scenarios limited, and the usefulness of military moves would thus appear confined to rather narrow corridors. If a war erupts in Asia, it is not likely to be the result of states or statesmen stumbling into it.

The fatuous impact of military planning

Going to war is a fundamentally political decision. However, the analogy of 1914 is regularly used to illustrate the fact that military planning can generate dynamics that precipitate political decisions. The way every nation in a strategic competition plans for the use of force as its ultima ratio can be an important determinant of how it acts in a state of tension or crisis. The interplay of such military schemes will also determine if and at what point military necessities – like the pressure to move first, or to pre-empt – begin to exert an independent “pull” on the course of events. Many historians who profoundly disagree about the political dynamics that led to World War I nevertheless share a conviction that military considerations played an important role.

According to this school of thought, a destabilizing “cult of the offensive”³ permeated military thought in all armies, favouring the potentially escalatory offense over the defence. In particular, the risky and eminently offensive two-front strategy conceived by the German military elite over two decades set a definitive framework for German decision-making in the heated atmosphere of July 1914. Resting as it did on strategic surprise, swift mobilization, and the violation of Belgium’s neutrality, it is seen as the example par excellence for a militarily sound operational approach that exerted a patently escalatory drag on diplomacy.

Today, many observers fear that a similar dynamic may develop, or may already be under way, in East Asia. As far as can be said, the military postures of the two major contestants in a potential clash of arms – the US and Chi-

na – exhibit a penchant for early offensive action. As a result of its relative weakness, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in particular would be forced to find ways of disabling the US armed forces’ most threatening capabilities early in any conflict, before they can be brought to bear against it. Therefore, its “counter-intervention” posture relies heavily on striking a successful first blow against the qualitatively superior US forces in the region.

On the other hand, while its efforts are hampered by both political and economic constraints, the US is already reacting quite strongly to the growth of China’s military prowess. The implementation of the controversial Air–Sea Battle (ASB) concept, which relies on networked, integrated deep attack to break down the “counter-intervention” barriers erected by the PLA will further raise the stakes for Chinese decision-makers. Faced with the much-enhanced offensive punch implied by such a posture and limited military options of their own, it would seem entirely plausible that they should see their best hope in striking first.

In spite of these valid arguments, it is unlikely that the US and China will be dragged by the autonomous “pull” of military imperatives or a fascination with offensive military concepts into a war their political leaders do not want. There are two main reasons why this is so: First, while pre-emption could in certain circumstances be an attractive military option for the PLA, this would be the case only if Chinese political decision-makers had come to believe that war is either unavoidable, that it is likely to result in significant gains at acceptable cost, or both. As this determination is an eminently political one, the resultant conflict would not be an “inadvertent” war at all, but would rather constitute an act of desperation, or the grasping of a perceived strategic opportunity. Secondly, while ASB indeed raises the possibility of intra-war escalation, it crucially depends on increasing the resilience of US forward-deployed forces. To the extent that it renders these forces less vulnerable to attack, it will decrease the pressure on US leaders to consider a pre-emptive strike of their own.

As a result, the second interpretation of the 1914 analogy is not likely to apply in 21st century East Asia, either. If the region is plunged into war, it is far more likely to be the result of a perceived lack of political options or of geopolitical design, than of the structure of the opponents’ military forces and the laying of their plans.

China rising

For decades after the armistice of 1918, most European elites shared the sentiment of Lloyd George that Europe had

“slithered” into the war. This consensus was shattered by Fritz Fischer in 1961, asserting that the war was the result of a long-term expansionist agenda of Imperial Germany. This agenda envisioned near-certain war to secure Germany’s rise; only the timing of the war was uncertain.

In the modern-day East Asian context, China is the power that seems most prepared to alter the status quo, by force if necessary. Its simmering tensions with Japan, which could boil over into a state of acute crisis in months ahead, stem primarily from Beijing’s escalatory policies. Admittedly, the Japanese have been inflexible on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute, and by insisting that the islands are an integral part of Japanese territory, have compelled China to up the ante. Even so, China is seeking to change local realities by pushing for a “new normal” wherein Japanese ships and aircraft avoid patrolling the islands’ vicinity, in exchange for similar restraint by China. This state of affairs, if it came to pass, would demand a significant change in Japanese patterns of behaviour that were previously unopposed by China, when Beijing was still talking of a “peaceful rise”.

From recent events in the East China Sea and the South China Sea it appears that Beijing has internalized the hype surrounding its rise, and assumed that it has the military capacity to make this rise “unstoppable”. Maritime disputes that were temporarily shelved to permit China to gain acceptance as a major player in the international system, are once again being brought to centre-stage in an effort to drum up nationalistic fervour. Since 1989, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has relied on patriotic education as a foil of democratization. This necessitates engendering a victim mentality among the populace by convincing them that China is the target of foreign machinations aimed at limiting its international profile.

FURTHER READING

Beyond Air–Sea Battle: The Debate Over US Military Strategy in Asia

Aaron L. Friedberg, IJSS 2014

The most comprehensive survey of the ongoing controversy over US military planning in Asia, by a leading thinker on US-China relations.

The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914

Christopher Clark, Allen Lane 2012

Well timed and superbly written, Christopher Clark’s volume sets the framework for current debate surrounding the centennial of the shots in Sarajevo.

The China Choice *Hugh White, Oxford University Press 2013*

Written by Australia’s premier strategist, this well-argued volume advocates a “grand bargain” with China and proposes a polycentric regional order along the lines of the 19th century Concert of Europe.

What has unfolded over recent years is an illustration of how precarious the CCP's balancing act really is. Old partners are becoming new adversaries. Japan, whose investments were crucial to Chinese economic development during the 1980s, is increasingly being portrayed as an unrepentant land-grabber. The CCP is allowing a sense of unbridled anger to build up against Tokyo, and only acts to contain this when there is a risk that the anger might turn against the Party itself.

In such a situation, it has become hard for the CCP leadership to persist with its professed claim to a peaceful rise. Indeed, it is telling that of late, even Chinese official statements have become much more assertive than they were in the early 2000s. More than any single factor, it is the combination of China's growing maritime profile in East Asia, and its willingness to continue asserting this profile in the face of opposition by neighbouring states, that carries the risk of armed conflict.

Looking to 1871

If 1914, then, is helpful to understand Asian security challenges, it points towards a rising power that could, under certain circumstances, feel compelled to defend its "historical rights" against a perceived encirclement by status-quo powers. If this is an adequate analogy, then oft-discussed methods of conflict prevention – among them, "hot lines" and protocols of conduct to prevent potentially escalatory mishaps – are necessary, but not sufficient conditions, as they chiefly pertain to unwanted, rather than intentional escalation.

It is worth repeating that there is nothing illegitimate about a rising China pursuing its interests and leveraging its increased geopolitical weight. However, it is perhaps enlightening to cite another historical analogy: Until China declares itself to be "saturated", as Bismarck did for Germany after 1871, no definitive improvement of security is to be expected. Too strong are regional suspicions of

Chinese designs; too deep is the mutual distrust. Limiting the scope of Chinese claims – even in the name of overriding national interests – will be challenging, and it will go against the grain of strong internal currents, as it did in Imperial Germany. However, as there were strong geopolitical reasons for Bismarck to pursue his policy of accommodation, so there are strong reasons for China to reign in aggressive elements – not so much to become a "responsible stakeholder" as to pursue fundamentally 19th century policies of enlightened self-interest.

Enabling the peaceful rise of a power like China evades policy steps that rest on a straightforward causal understanding of politics as is prevalent in Western policy analysis. Furthermore, even by working towards a transformation of the geopolitical framework, current conflicts and historical antagonisms will not disappear. As of now, there is not much that lets a peaceful future seem likely. However, if a conflict transformation is successfully pursued, "1914" might lose its dark predictive power for Asian security.

SELECTED SOURCES

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2. Christopher Clark: *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914*, Penguin Books 2013, p. 562.
3. Stephen Van Evera: *The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War*, *International Security*, Summer, 1984 (Vol. 9, No. 1).

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