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1914 Revisited: Great Power War in the 21st Century

Are the historical analogies being made between 1914 and 2014 largely bogus, especially when it comes to the possibility of more 'Great Wars'? David Kearn thinks so. So long as the US remains the keeper of global order, the threat of force by the likes of Moscow or Beijing is likely to be self-defeating.

By David W. Kearn for ISN

War between great powers has often been viewed as a driver of international history. Yet more than a decade ago, Robert Jervis wrote that the world had entered a period of great power peace, primarily because actually incurring the high costs of such a war had become unthinkable. While he was careful to note that the potential for violent conflict persisted outside of the West and that non-Western great powers (such as China or Russia) may still view coercive diplomacy and military force as useful policy tools in certain contexts, his predictions have been largely accurate. In the summer of 2014, however, a century removed from the outbreak of the First World War, fears of another unthinkable, catastrophic war are on the rise.

2014: On the path to another Great War?

In the spring of 1914, the great powers of Europe, divided into two increasingly rigid sets of alliances, stood at the precipice of a war that had been feared for a generation. At the center of European politics was the Franco-German rivalry which had intensified after Prussia's military victory in 1871. Germany's belligerent foreign policy under Wilhelm II had cemented relations between France and Russia and unnerved Britain, which viewed Germany's naval and imperial ambitions with suspicion and fear. These policies left Germany allied with a declining Austria-Hungary.

Throughout the first decade of the twentieth century, a number of diplomatic crises nearly precipitated a major war, but it was the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo that ultimately provided the spark. Under the influence of nationalism, militarism, imperialism, and rapid changes in military technology, the great powers then waged a catastrophic war of attrition.

There are two major lines of explanation for the origins of the war. The first acknowledges Europe's fragile balance of power – managed tenuously by shifting alliances and fortunate diplomacy – and explains the outbreak of hostilities as essentially accidental. This view holds that misperceptions and bad choices by poor leaders allowed Europe to “fall” into war.

The second view places the blame squarely on Germany. Whether because German leaders saw a closing "window of opportunity" to revise the existing order, or because the Kaiser simply desired war after various humiliations (real or imagined), or because of a breakdown of political leadership that led to a loss of control over the military, this view maintains that the fault ultimately lies with German policy.

Today, great power war has returned to the realm of possibility, which makes the 1914 analogy an apt one. This time, however, it is East Asia rather than Europe that resembles a 'powder keg.' The presence of several great powers with longstanding historical enmities and outstanding territorial disputes has created conditions where aggressive policies and misperception may once again conspire to spark a major conflict.

The reconciliation of China's rise with East Asia's existing security architecture – which is founded upon US alliances with Japan and South Korea – is likely to be the central geopolitical challenge of this century. Nevertheless, while a skirmish over disputed territories could escalate into a larger conflict, there are other forces at work to mitigate those dynamics. Most importantly, high levels of economic interdependence and extensive trade and financial relations among the East Asian powers would make conflict extremely costly. Although the First World War also occurred after a period of economic openness and relative 'globalization,' the scale and scope of interdependence in East Asia today dwarfs that of pre-war Europe. Moreover, conflict in East Asia is still perceived to be far less likely than it was in European capitals in 1914. Overall, this can be attributed to the role of the United States as a regional balancer in Asia, which has no parallel in the pre-war period in Europe. Of course, the capacity of the US to play this role may diminish over time, but it makes the worst-case scenario unlikely in the short-term.

An alternative analogy: The interwar period

Russia's recent annexation of Crimea and the prospect of further intervention in Ukraine are troubling and have stoked fears about a new 'great war'. Rather than 1914, however, a better analogy for Europe's current situation may be the interwar period, which was characterized less by great power rivalry and *realpolitik* than by the external implications of unstable and troubled domestic politics. The severe economic turmoil of Europe's inter-war years exacerbated underlying social divisions and undermined the efforts of political leaders to restore order and "normalcy" to war-weary populations. The influence of clashing ideologies, revolution and counter-revolution, and unstable domestic politics shaped the foreign policies of leading states, ultimately precipitating war.

In central and eastern Europe, several new, weak states emerged in formerly imperial lands. Though considered a triumph for democracy and self-determination, the consolidation of the Bolshevik Revolution and Stalin's rise to power in the Soviet Union left a revolutionary, revisionist state on Europe's eastern flank. Moreover, domestic politics across Europe remained unstable, as the burdens of post-war reconstruction proved daunting for most states. The financial crash of 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression then further taxed the capacities of national governments and set the stage for reactionary forces to take power, including fascist governments in Italy and Spain, and the National Socialist party in Germany.

When the flawed League of Nations failed to deter or reverse Italy's aggression against Ethiopia (or Japan's against China), the perceived costs of belligerence declined. The subsequent inability of Great Britain and France to come to an agreement with Moscow precluded any realistic chance of deterring Germany. Appeasement at Munich bought time, but – once Poland had suffered yet another partition through the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact – war became difficult to avoid.

Putin's adventure: How far will he go?

Comparisons can be made between Putin's Russia and inter-war Germany. Even if the National Socialists had not come to power in Germany in 1933, war would have been likely. Any nationalist or militarist government would have sought to use force, if necessary, to address the perceived humiliations and territorial penalties of the Versailles Treaty – though probably without the military adventure against the Soviet Union or the final solution. Of course, whether these attempts would have led to another World War is difficult to say.

The parallel between post-Weimar Germany and Putin's Russia is most useful in highlighting how nationalism and an assertive foreign policy—especially in the context of perceived national humiliations – can be used to consolidate domestic political power. Today, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the loss of influence over historically compliant territories in Russia's "near abroad," and the expansion of NATO during a period of Russian weakness, animate Moscow elites, just as war guilt, reparations, the loss of territory, and mandated disarmament drove the resentment of German elites a century ago. Putin clearly appreciates the domestic political benefits of a strong Russian foreign policy, and Ukraine has presented an opportunity to reassert Russian interests vis-à-vis the West.

Now as then, democratic Western Europe is less than resolute in the face of this belligerence. Preoccupied with recovering from the most serious economic crisis since the inception of the Eurozone, neither Brussels nor (more importantly) Berlin seems to have any appetite for a forceful stand against Russia. But even with its problems, Europe today is unified (at least by historical standards) and remains a global economic power that possesses the latent capabilities to punish Russian transgressions. No less significantly, the presence of US military forces within NATO provides a robust deterrent. While limited economic sanctions have been criticized, the prospect of greater pain for the Russian economy (which is already in serious distress) may be sufficient to prevent further aggression. Unless Putin has truly become an irrational adventurer, committed to expansion at the expense of Russia's interests, his policies will continue to be merely opportunistic in nature.

The current period in world affairs may indeed seem more uncertain and potentially dangerous than any since the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, the increased assertiveness of non-Western powers only reaffirms the centrality of the United States to the peace, security, and prosperity of its allies around the globe. The threat of force by Moscow or Beijing is likely to be self-defeating, as those threatened will naturally seek to reinforce and re-energize their ties to the keeper of global order, the United States. As long as America's unwieldy and divided political system does not fundamentally erode its power and jeopardize its standing in the world, the probability of great power war should remain remote.

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