

258 Asia Today – 1914 redux? ANU 18 March 2014

The introduction

It is almost 100 years since the first shots of the First World War rang out. How the great European powers seemingly stumbled into a disastrous war through a maelstrom of ambition, revenge, fear, misjudgements and alliance obligations has been a matter of keen debate ever since. While the events of July and August 1914 have appeared puzzling, they have echoed through the following century as a cautionary tale of how things can go wrong, and do so with alarming rapidity.

Many scholars and policy makers worry that today East Asia risks a similar tragedy. The region sees growing and possibly waning great powers, the introduction of new technologies of warfare, strident nationalism, tense diplomatic relationships and a complex economic interdependence. So does Europe in 1914 portend a possible future for Asia a hundred years later? Or should we be wary of a so simple, if not simplistic, comparison? This special event brings together some leading scholars of Australia and Asia to explore both what set off the guns in 1914, and how they can be forestalled in 2014.

The participants

Professors Joan Beaumont, Hugh White, Michael Wesley and Evelyn Goh from the Australian National University, Canberra, chaired by Dr Brendan Taylor, Head, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, School of International, Political and Strategic Studies, ANU College of Asia and the Pacific, with an audience of a couple of hundred.

The remarks

Joan Beaumont

The years leading up to 1914 were years of *power transition* with the rapid rise of Germany contributing to an air of instability. Power transition depends upon the willingness of the formerly dominant powers to acquiesce in the transition.

Secondly, these years were characterised by *rigid alliance systems and inflexible military planning*, such as the German Schlieffen Plan. Thirdly, there was *poor decision-making*, for example, the willingness by Germany to acquiesce in the Austro-Hungarian attack on Serbia.

Finally, there were *militaristic cultures* and the feeling that war was an inevitable phenomenon and a way of testing national character. Even in Australia, there was a feeling that Australians had to prove themselves 'worthy sons of the Empire'.

The 'xenophobic nationalism' that was present then is still around today and she felt positive about the future only because conflict was unthinkable.

Hugh White

Nothing in 1914 or now makes war inevitable although the circumstances in 1914 made it easier for a small conflict to grow into a large one and a short conflict to become a long one. *How many of the circumstances of 1914 exist today?*

First: Power transition: in 1914 Germany, the United States, Japan and Russia were on the rise, while the United Kingdom, France, Austria-Hungary and Turkey were in decline; *today*, the pattern is simpler with the rise of China the fastest and largest rise ever, as well as India also rising, while Japan and the US are relatively in decline.

Secondly: The 'order' or system of control: 1914 the 'concert of Europe', based on mutual respect, had already collapsed with Bismarck's takeover of Alsace-Lorraine in 1871, deteriorating relations between Russia and Austria and Germany's challenge to Britain's naval superiority; *2014* sees the end of a sustained period of uncontested primacy of the US; the 'order' is already not working though other powers still expect the US to act as it has previously; there is some doubt whether the US is prepared to continue to act in this way.

Thirdly: The unusual weakness of governments: 1914 there were dysfunctional governments in Russia, Austria-Hungary and Germany, which were all monarchies transitioning uneasily to democracies with the locus of power uncertain; the UK and France had modern democratic systems but in France governments changed rapidly and in the UK the Asquith Government was ineffectual; generally difficult to make good decisions; *2014: Obama Administration* is ineffectual, Abe (Japan) is similar and the new leadership in China is an unknown quantity.

Fourthly: Politicians' lack of understanding of the nature of military force: 1914 governments did not understand the implications of the mass mobilisation of troops by rail; *2014: weak understanding of the limits on the use of force*, for example, regarding the use of nuclear weapons and the logistics of air-sea battles.

Fifthly: Wishful thinking: 1914: everyone hoped for the best, that the other side would back down; *2014: East China Sea (Senkaku)* wishful thinking between China, Japan and the US.

Michael Wesley

History: History is used and misused in making momentous decisions. Examples include the overuse of July-August 1914 and of Munich 1938.

Time: In 1914, two broad factors led to war: the rise of mass politics led to 'jingoism' and placed pressure on political leaders; rapid industrial growth produced developments in the technology of war, 'the technologies of killing', which misaligned with outdated strategic concepts.

In 2014, there is mass politics again but it is internally focused onto criticism of national governments (China, Thailand) rather than directed at foreign 'enemies'. In 2014, there is again an arms race but it is in slow motion rather than rapid.

Geography: Europe in 1914 was small and crowded with five dominant powers (Britain, France, Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary) and relatively weak subsidiary powers. Asia now is large and crowded, it takes in the Pacific, including the US, and India. It has four large powers (China, India, Japan and the US) but many significant smaller powers, including Australia. The choices made by these smaller powers are important in whether or not war happens; none of the four great powers can operate without the support of smaller powers e.g. the US cannot project power across the Pacific without 'local' support; India similarly;

China and Japan are diplomatically isolated; smaller powers, notably Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia on the Indo-Pacific peninsula, are key.

[Evelyn Goh](#)

East Asia is a region of much unfinished business: remaining Communist countries; divided Korea; post-colonialism; post-imperialism; internal conflicts; China versus Japan since 16th century.

US involvement in Asia disrupted resolution of China vs Japan. It is not just a matter of China rising and the US declining; have to take account of Japan also. China sees the US alliance with Japan as cover for the rise of a militarised Japan; China would prefer to ignore Japan but it cannot do so.

The rise of China is unprecedented though there are some partial analogies pre 1914 with Metternich and Bismarck.

East Asia is still some way short of alliance breakdowns as in 1914.

The Chinese use of force historically has been defensive and carefully calibrated; there is no sign recently of Chinese appetite for a prolonged war.

The US still has a key role but time is not on its side, particularly if it is unwilling either to share power or to assert it.

[Questions and discussion](#)

Wesley: There is a high possibility of war but not of full-scale conflict. Asian industrial interdependency and energy poverty are constraining factors.

White: Russia in the recent past challenged the US and China is bigger economically now than Russia ever was. This is reflected in China's weight in the international trading system. China is investing militarily in areas that will undermine US capacity to project power into Asia e.g. Senkakus today where US intervention could be militarily challenged by China which would not have been the case 15-20 years ago. China since 2008 gives the impression it feels it can challenge the US; it is past the stage of biding its time and hiding its power.

Beaumont: People used to talk in 1914 about economic interdependency.

Goh: China has few allies but few potential enemies.

Wesley: The smaller powers are the 'swing players', not the larger powers. The smaller powers do not want to have to choose between the larger powers.

David Stephens

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