

# Assessing the danger of war: parallels and differences between Europe in 1914 and East Asia in 2014

JOACHIM KRAUSE

Current strategic developments in North and South-East Asia are marked by a considerable degree of uncertainty. Increasingly, observers are conjuring up the danger of armed conflict in the region; even the threat of a major war is being discussed. In fact, there are many uncomfortable indications; the rise (both economically and militarily) of China, the US pivot to Asia (which in effect means a stronger military role in the region), the growing uneasiness of Japan with its pacifist orientation and the continuing trouble brought about by North Korea's nuclear sabre-rattling; the combination of these potential causes of tension with the open disputes over maritime sovereignty in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, the lingering Taiwan issue, and the many other small and medium-sized conflicts in the area does not bode well for the future. Regional institutions are attempting to deal with these issues through diplomacy, but their record is sobering: indeed, as the International Institute for Strategic Studies Shangri-La Dialogue of May 2014 in Singapore amply demonstrated, there are no diplomatic solutions in sight. The United States accused China, in harsh terms, of destabilizing unilateral actions, while China criticized the United States in aggressive language for building up alliances directed against China. A similar lack of moderation was apparent in the reactions of representatives of other governments in the region.<sup>1</sup>

For many years, Europeans were told by Asians that the catastrophe of 1914 would not be repeated in Asia. More recently, however, strategic assessments on Asia have been sounding less optimistic. After the Chinese–Japanese confrontation over a few small uninhabited islands in 2012, and after recent clashes between China and Vietnam in the South China Sea, the question is being posed: Will East Asia be the theatre of a major war involving China, America, Japan and perhaps others? Could East Asia even become the cradle of a Third World War? Inevitably, in 2014, the question arises whether there are similarities between East Asia today and Europe a century ago. Just as in Asia a few years ago, in the first decade of the twentieth century Europe seemed to be a continent looking forward to another long period of peace. There had been no major war since 1871; the economies of the various European states were growing and becoming increasingly interconnected; the different national societies showed many similarities

<sup>1</sup> See Helene Cooper and Jane Perlez, 'US sway in Asia is imperiled as China challenges alliances', *New York Times*, 31 May 2014, p. A1.

in terms of societal, economic and domestic political development, as well as in culture, education and science. All states were coping with the same type of social problems, in particular how to bridge the huge divide between the poor and the rich, and how to manage the competition between modernity and tradition.

Is Asia on its way towards treading the path Europe took in summer 1914? One approach to answering this question is to look for historical analogies and to draw lessons from 1914 that could be applicable in 2014. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, for instance, stated in January 2014 that the rise of China was comparable to the rise of the German empire more than 100 years ago, and that a concomitant risk exists that another major war could result from this.<sup>2</sup> Paul J. Saunders even called Beijing the 'New Berlin', the 'capital of a self-confident rising power dissatisfied with the existing international order'.<sup>3</sup> Others were more cautious, such as British historian Margaret MacMillan,<sup>4</sup> but even so pointed to certain similarities in the two situations.

This assessment resonates within the International Relations theory debate. Structural realists have traditionally pointed to the risks associated with the emergence of new powers. The rise of new powers is usually said to lead to a confrontation with old powers, which defend their status or the international order they had created, against an aspiring state.<sup>5</sup> In a seminal article, Harvard scholar Graham T. Allison dubbed this phenomenon 'Thucydides' trap'. Allison wrote:

If we were betting on the basis of history, the answer to the question about Thucydides' trap appears obvious. In 11 of 15 cases since 1500 where a rising power emerged to challenge a ruling power, war occurred. Think about Germany after unification as it overtook Britain as Europe's largest economy. In 1914 and in 1939, its aggression and the UK's response produced world wars.<sup>6</sup>

In assessing the probability of war in East Asia, the theory of Thucydides' trap sounds more convincing than liberal-institutionalist theories, which usually stress the beneficial effects of international trade, economic interdependence and inter-societal contacts for international peace.<sup>7</sup> The decades preceding the First World

<sup>2</sup> See Jane Perlez, 'Japan's leader compares strain with China to Germany and Britain in 1914', *New York Times*, 23 Jan. 2014, p. A8.

<sup>3</sup> Paul J. Saunders, '1914 and 2014 in Europe and Asia', Tokyo Foundation website, 10 March 2014, <http://www.tokyofoundation.org>, accessed 30 Sept. 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret MacMillan, *The rhyme of history: lessons of the Great War* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 2013); see also Nick Bisley, 'It's not 1914 all over again: Asia is preparing to avoid war', *The Conversation* website, 10 March 2014, <http://theconversation.com>, accessed 30 Sept. 2014.

<sup>5</sup> See Aaron L. Friedberg, *A contest for supremacy: China, America, and the struggle for mastery in Asia* (New York: Norton, 2011), p. 39; Hugh White, *The China choice: why America should share power* (Collingwood, Australia: Black, 2012), pp. 59–60; Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese political thought, modern Chinese power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 202–203; John J. Mearsheimer, 'The gathering storm: China's challenge to US power in Asia', *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3: 4, 2010, pp. 381–96. Most thinking goes back to Robert Gilpin, *War and change in world politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 198–210.

<sup>6</sup> Graham T. Allison, 'Avoiding Thucydides' trap', *Financial Times*, 22 Aug. 2012.

<sup>7</sup> The traditional concept of peace through trade has been made by Norman Angell, *The great illusion: a study of the relation of military power in nations to their economic and social advantages* (London: Heinemann, 1906), and by Joseph A. Schumpeter, 'Sociology of imperialism', in Richard Swedberg, ed., *The economics and sociology of capitalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 141–219 (first publ. 1919). More recent advocates of the theory of peace through trade are John Mueller, *Capitalism, democracy and Ralph's pretty good grocery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Erich Weede, 'The capitalist peace and the rise of

War were characterized by a remarkable growth in international trade and foreign investment, with an upswing in international traffic and communication. However, the high level of globalization and interdependence had no tangible effect on the readiness of the European powers to go to war. Rather, the successful liberal international economic order of the nineteenth century had set free economic dynamics and forces which eventually facilitated structural shifts in the constellation of military forces, supporting realist theories that focus on the economic and technological sources of power shifts.<sup>8</sup> In today's East Asia the situation is not totally different from that of Europe before the First World War. Again, we have an international liberal economic order which has set free economic dynamics (mainly the economic rise of China, but that of other countries as well) that are translating into structural changes in the field of armed force. The strategic balance in East Asia is being fundamentally altered. Liberal-institutionalist theories give us some hope that this time events will take a different course.<sup>9</sup> But if this expectation is not fulfilled, realist theory will provide us with concepts and tools with which to understand the dynamics of conflict that might translate into a major war.

This article looks for possible *structural analogies* between 1914 and 2014, proceeding in two stages. First, the theory of Thucydides' trap—which currently seems to find broad acceptance—is tested to determine whether or not it provides us with a reasonable tool to understand relevant structural analogies between Europe in 1914 and Asia in 2014, and, in particular, whether it is helpful in *predicting the probability of the outbreak of a major war*. In the second stage, alternatives to this theory are discussed, the author having come to the conclusion that the theory of Thucydides' trap does not provide us with a reliable instrument to understand the dynamics that led to the outbreak of the First World War and that it has only limited value in predicting the probability of a major war in East Asia. At best, it helps in identifying a few of the relevant independent variables that could be useful in assessing the probability of a major war. An article recently published in *International Security* reaches a similar conclusion.<sup>10</sup> However, the authors of that article looked only at rather broad historical analogies and neglected to examine the military dimension as well as geography and economics. This article investigates a broader set of variables, paying particular attention to the nature of the international system, the role of nationalism, the nature of military strategies, doctrines, forces and force multipliers, and the role of geography and the dynamics of war. The author arrives at the conclusion that the First World War will not be

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China: establishing global harmony by economic interdependence', *International Interactions* 36: 2, 2010, pp. 206–13; John R. Oneal and Bruce Russett, 'Assessing the liberal peace with alternative specifications: trade still reduces conflict', *Journal of Peace Research* 36: 4, 1999, pp. 423–42. For a critical review of the liberal trade and peace theory, see Edwin van de Haar, 'The liberal divide over trade, peace and war', *International Relations* 24: 2, 2010, pp. 132–54; see also Katherine Barbieri and Gerald Schneider, 'Globalization and peace: assessing new directions in the study of trade and conflict', *Journal of Peace Research* 36: 4, 1999, pp. 387–404.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. Paul M. Kennedy, *The rise and fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> For a nuanced assessment of the relevance of economic interdependence for East Asia from a liberal-institutionalist position, see Benjamin E. Goldsmith, 'A liberal peace in Asia?', *Journal of Peace Research* 44: 1, 2007, pp. 5–27.

<sup>10</sup> Ja Ian Chong and Todd H. Hall, 'The lessons of 1914 for East Asia today', *International Security* 39: 1, Summer 2014, pp. 7–43.

repeated in East Asia, but that there are nevertheless reasons to be concerned about future risks of a major strategic clash between the United States and China in two distinct theatres, with potentially far-reaching consequences.

### The limited applicability of Thucydides' trap theory

Why is the theory of Thucydides' trap more applicable to the current situation in East Asia than to the situation 100 years ago? The answer is quite simple: while in the early twentieth century a fairly gradual shift in the correlation of forces on the European continent was taking place, the current shift in East Asia is of a really fundamental nature. What we are now experiencing is the reversal of a global trend that became established during the eighteenth century—the dominance of the western world, in terms of economic activity, technological progress and military capabilities, over traditional Asian powers such as China, Persia, the Ottoman empire, Japan and India.<sup>11</sup> Particularly since 1820, world economic development had gained a tremendous momentum, especially in the West (Europe and North America), which turned out to be much more dynamic than the rest of the world. Between 1820 and 2006, the western average GDP increased by a factor of 21, while in the rest of the world it increased only eightfold.<sup>12</sup> Today, China is catching up and is likely to overtake the US in terms of economic output within the next decade. In view of this prospect and its enormous human capital, China might be in a position to acquire a dominant global economic position in the foreseeable future. In terms of population, China already outnumbered the US, Europe and Russia together, and while in terms of industrial capacities it is still trailing behind the US and Europe (Russia can be left aside in this context),

**Table 1: A comparison of annual economic growth rates (%)**

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
China	8.4	8.3	9.1	10.0	10.1	10.4	11.6	11.4	8.9	8.68	10.13
India	3.94	5.15	4.09	8.61	6.9	8.43	9.69	9.03	7.0	7.56	8.5
Japan	2.83	0.16	0.26	1.46	2.72	1.87	2.21	2.03	-0.7	-5.27	4.36
US	4.14	1.08	1.81	2.49	3.57	3.05	2.67	1.95	0.0	-2.63	2.40

Source: Amitav Acharya, 'Can Asia lead? Power ambitions and global governance', *International Affairs* 87: 2, March 2011, pp. 851–69 at p. 857, based on data from the US Department of Agriculture.

<sup>11</sup> See Eric Jones, *The European miracle: environments, economies and geopolitics in the history of Europe and Asia*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Angus Maddison, *The world economy*, vol. 1: *A millennial perspective* (Paris: OECD, 2001); Angus Maddison, *Contours of the world economy, 1–2030 AD: essays in macro-economic history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Douglass C. North and Robert Paul Thomas, *The rise of the western world: a new economic history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); Kenneth Pomeranz, *The great divergence: China, Europe, and the making of the modern world economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Angus Maddison, 'The West and the rest in the world economy: 1000–2030. Maddisonian and Malthusian interpretations', *World Economics* 9: 4, Oct.–Dec. 2008, pp. 75–99 at p. 76.

this is likely to change. Between 1978 and 2003, China's average annual growth rate reached 7.85 per cent (compared to America's 2.49 per cent), while per capita income during that period grew at an average annual rate of 6.57 per cent.<sup>13</sup> Since 2000, China's annual growth rate has varied between 8.3 and 11.6 per cent (see table 1), and the country is seeking to use its constantly growing technological and industrial capabilities to acquire new means of warfare and broaden the scope of its military options. Since 1990, Chinese defence expenditures have grown on average by more than 10 per cent per year. It appears that China has no ambition to bypass the United States in terms of military capabilities on a global scale, but certainly intends to offset the current US posture in the East Asian region. China has profited from the existence of an international order (in particular the international free trade order) that was created by the United States and its allies after the Second World War. The Chinese leadership is well aware of the benefits it derives from the international economic order and has a substantial stake in attempts to consolidate it. However, there are elements of the existing international order (such as respect for individual human rights, respect for the national sovereignty of other states, the pursuit of multilateralism, and the role of the United States and the West as the main supporters of this order) about which China has its own views, and in respect of which it takes its own line, especially in its own neighbourhood.

**Table 2: Annual growth rates of European and North American economies, 1870–1913 (%)**

Country	Annual average compound growth rates	
	GDP	GDP per capita
Austria-Hungary	2.4	1.5
Canada	4.1	2.3
Denmark	2.7	1.6
France	1.5	1.3
Germany	2.8	1.6
Italy	1.9	1.4
Netherlands	2.3	1.0
Russia	3.4*	n.a.
Sweden	2.2	1.5
Switzerland	2.1	1.2
United Kingdom	1.9	1.0
United States	3.9	1.8

\*Only for the periods 1885–99 (3.5 %) and 1900–1913 (3.2%).

Sources: A. G. Kennwood and A. L. Lougheed, *The growth of the international economy 1820–2000* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 20; Angus Maddison, *Dynamic forces in capitalist development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 49–50; Vitali A. Meliantsev, 'Russia's comparative economics in the long run', *Social Evolution and History* 3: 1, March 2004, pp. 106–36.

<sup>13</sup> Maddison, 'The West and the rest in the world economy', p. 84.

If we turn to look at the rise of Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we see a quite different picture. As the figures on average annual growth rates (both overall GDP and GDP per capita) indicate, the German growth rates between 1870 and 1913 were higher than those of France and the United Kingdom, but the differences were not very significant (see table 2). Smaller states, such as Denmark or Sweden, had similar growth rates to Germany on average, and, more importantly, the United States and Russia had growth rates considerably higher than the respective German figures. Germany had passed Great Britain in terms of GNP by 1913, but only if one compared the respective home territories. If colonial possessions were included, British GNP was almost twice as high as the German.<sup>14</sup> In terms of level of industrialization, Germany surpassed France in the 1880s, but it was not able to reach the British level before 1913 (table 3). In 1913, the relative share of Germany in terms of manufacturing output was on the same level as that of the United Kingdom and much lower than that of the US. In terms of GNP per capita, Germany was still trailing behind Britain in 1914 and was on an equal footing with France. Only in the field of pig iron and steel production did the German empire already surpass Great Britain in 1900. By the year 1910, Germany produced about twice as much steel as Britain and 50 per cent more crude steel.<sup>15</sup> However, the increase in production of steel and pig iron was much greater in the United States. In 1914, the total output of US production in both areas was larger than the combined production of Germany, Great Britain and France together.<sup>16</sup>

**Table 3: Relative shares of global manufacturing production: European countries and others, 1750–1914 (%)**

Country	1750	1800	1830	1860	1880	1900	1913
UK	1.9	4.3	9.5	19.9	22.9	18.5	13.6
France	4.0	4.2	5.2	7.9	7.8	6.8	6.1
Germany	2.9	3.5	3.5	4.9	8.5	13.2	14.8
Austria	2.9	3.2	3.2	4.2	4.4	4.7	4.4
Russia	5.0	5.6	5.6	7.0	7.6	8.8	8.2
United States	0.1	0.8	2.4	7.2	14.7	23.6	32.0
Rest*	73.0	66.7	60.5	36.6	20.9	11.0	7.5

\*The rest is mainly China and India

Source: Paul Bairoch, 'International industrialization levels from 1750 to 1980', *Journal of European Economic History* 11: 1–2, 1982, pp. 269–333, p. 296.

<sup>14</sup> See Stephen Broadberry and S. N. Broadberry, *The economics of World War One: a comparative quantitative analysis* (Coventry: University of Warwick, Department of Economics, Aug. 2005), pp. 23–6 (tables 1, 2), <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/staff/academic/harrison/papers/ww1toronto2.pdf>, accessed 8 Oct. 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Hajo Holborn, *A history of modern Germany 1840–1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), vol. 3, p. 376.

<sup>16</sup> Brian R. Mitchell, *International historical statistics: Europe*, 4th edn (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998); Brian R. Mitchell, *International historical statistics: the Americas*, 4th edn (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998).

**Table 4: Manpower strength of major European armies in 1914**

Country	Peacetime strength	Wartime strength	Strength late Aug. 1914
Austria-Hungary	478,000	1,338,000	2,300,000
France	827,000	1,800,000	3,781,000
Germany	761,000	2,147,000	3,822,000
Russia	1,445,000	3,400,000	4,000,000
United Kingdom	248,000	400,000	1,000,000

Source: Reichsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg 1914–1918*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Mittler & Sons, 1925), p. 498.

Even in terms of population growth, Germany was not the only dynamic state in Europe. Between 1870 and 1914 its population grew from 40.8 million to 67.8 million, an increase of 66 per cent. This vastly outpaced the growth of the French population, which during the same period grew by only 5 per cent, from 37.6 million to 39.5 million. But Russia's grew as fast as Germany's, rising from 85 million to 140 million over the same years. Moreover, even the German rise in population relative to France was not enough to upset the military balance. In early 1914, the number of German soldiers during peacetime was smaller than the number of French soldiers, and even after full mobilization both sides had rough parity (tables 4 and 5).

**Table 5: Manpower strength of land and naval forces of major European powers, 1880–1914**

Country	1880	1890	1900	1910	1914
Austria-Hungary	246,000	346,000	385,000	425,000	444,000
France	543,000	542,000	715,000	769,000	910,000
Germany	426,000	504,000	524,000	694,000	891,000
Russia	791,000	677,000	1,162,000	1,285,000	1,352,000
United Kingdom	367,000	420,000	624,000	571,000	532,000

Source: Paul M. Kennedy, *The rise and fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1987), p. 203, based on Quincy Wright, *A study of war* (Chicago: Chicago University Press; 1943), vol. 1, pp. 670–72 (tables 58–60).

What all these figures indicate is that Germany did catch up with France and Britain in its industrial development, closing a gap of 20 years with France and 40 years with Britain that had its origins in Germany's territorial fragmentation during the first half of the nineteenth century. Yet Germany's rise was not accompanied by a French or British decline.<sup>17</sup> On the contrary, in the years of Germany's economic growth, both Britain and France continued to grow too (albeit, as was to be expected, at lower rates than the latecomer Germany), with strong

<sup>17</sup> See Keith Neilson, "Greatly exaggerated": the myth of the decline of Great Britain before 1914', *International History Review* 13: 4, 1991, pp. 695–725; on the British debate on decline, see Aaron L. Friedberg, *The weary Titan: Great Britain and the experience of relative decline, 1895–1905* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

and healthy economies and effective military establishments. In addition, they not only consolidated their colonial possessions but conquered almost every ‘white spot’ in Africa between 1880 and 1914. By the time war broke out in 1914, France and Britain between them controlled about one-third of the globe; together with Russia, they claimed authority over more than half of the globe. If there was one state with a mid-term economic and military dynamic that could be considered to pose a potentially serious challenge to the established European powers, it was the United States, which was already stronger than the major European states combined. But Russia too could boast impressive growth rates that demonstrated that Germany was not the only nation in Europe that was catching up.

The big diplomatic challenge of the late nineteenth century was how to incorporate the late arrival Germany into the modern European state system,<sup>18</sup> and how to prepare for the coming rise of the much larger Russia and the inclusion of the even stronger United States in the international system. Many authors have argued that Great Britain was the leading nation at that time and that it therefore bore responsibility for maintaining the international order.<sup>19</sup> While Britain’s leading role on a global scale was undisputed, within Europe Britain was one of four or five major powers, unable to impose its will unilaterally upon others. As regards the issue of maintaining stability in Europe, the main concern of the Foreign Office was to keep the balance of power in Europe—an eighteenth-century concept difficult to translate into practice under conditions of fundamental international economic, technological and societal change.<sup>20</sup> The cabinet in London at least showed concern for the consequences for Europe of the relative rise of Germany and the resultant Russian–French alliance. In 1898 and 1901 the British government attempted to sort out with the German government how to redefine their relationship in an amicable way and to find common ground in dealing with European and imperial problems. This historic opportunity, however, was forfeited by Kaiser Wilhelm II and his Foreign Minister and later Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow. Both wanted Britain to declare itself either as an ally or as a foe of Germany; neither had any feeling for diplomatic intricacies and subtleties. In addition, in German public opinion the rage over British aggression in southern Africa during the Boer Wars was still running high, and for his part the Kaiser was intent on pursuing the far-reaching naval plans that were dear to his heart.<sup>21</sup> After the failure of these attempts to establish a diplomatic dialogue—which could have

<sup>18</sup> See Jonathan Steinberg, ‘Old knowledge and new research: a summary of the conference on the Fischer controversy 50 years on’, *Journal of Contemporary History* 48: 2, April 2013, pp. 241–50 at p. 248.

<sup>19</sup> See G. John Ikenberry, *After victory: institutions, strategic restraint, and the rebuilding of order after major wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 80–116; Ali Parchami, *Hegemonic peace and empire: the Pax Romana, Britannica and Americana* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2009), pp. 61–164; Paul Young, *Globalization and the Great Exhibition: the Victorian new world order* (London: Palgrave, 2009), pp. 145–97; David Reynolds, *Britannia overruled: British policy and world power in the twentieth century* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), pp. 36–61.

<sup>20</sup> For an excellent analysis of the predominant thinking in the British Foreign Office, see Thomas G. Otte, *The Foreign Office mind: the making of British foreign policy, 1865–1914* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>21</sup> See René Albrecht-Carrié, *A diplomatic history of Europe since the Congress of Vienna* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), pp. 226–31; Klaus Hildebrand, *Das vergangene Reich. Deutsche Außenpolitik von Bismarck bis Hitler, 1871–1945* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1995), pp. 213–21.

ended in a silent alliance—imperial Germany was primarily viewed in London as a threat to British interests. British diplomacy increasingly perceived Germany as a security risk, as the main economic competitor, and as a serious competitor for colonial possessions.<sup>22</sup> At least after 1904, Britain ceased to act as an agent of international order in Europe.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, by the beginning of the twentieth century, there was no international or European order at all. During the early nineteenth century, there had been a functioning European order among the major powers, according to which these powers promised not to use military force in their bilateral relationships and within which they cooperated in order to solve local or regional disputes by diplomatic means.<sup>24</sup> But this ‘Concert of Europe’ was gradually eroded with the Crimean War and the wars of Italian and German unification.<sup>25</sup> In all of these conflicts, military force was used as a normal means of political intercourse—with negative consequences for the international order, which had hitherto been based on the renunciation of the use of force. According to Henry Kissinger, France under Napoleon III and Prussia under Bismarck bore the main responsibility for this erosion.<sup>26</sup> However, after 1871 the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck again worked towards re-establishing the Concert of Europe, with some success; but after his resignation in 1890, neither France, Russia nor Germany showed any great interest in resuming concert diplomacy, and although Britain undertook a few half-hearted efforts in that direction, these expired in 1912–13 after a relatively successful effort by the five powers to create some Albanian statehood.<sup>27</sup> Other enterprises assumed greater importance, among them expanding and securing colonial empires and searching for coalitions which promised military superiority. The European state system of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was marked by outright anarchy, and this anarchy made it difficult to accommodate emerging powers.<sup>28</sup>

There was, however, an international economic order which was initiated by British free trade diplomacy in the 1860s. The United Kingdom had negotiated free trade agreements with various other governments that constituted a dynamic network of free trade spaces. This resulted in a remarkable growth of international trade and division of labour that led to a considerable degree of globalization.<sup>29</sup> The German empire profited greatly from free trade and indeed owed its

<sup>22</sup> See Paul M. Kennedy, *The rise of the Anglo-German antagonism, 1860–1914* (London: Humanity Books, 1987).

<sup>23</sup> See Henry A. Kissinger, *World order: reflections on the character of nations and the course of history* (London: Allen Lane, 2014), p. 79.

<sup>24</sup> See Norman Rich, *Great Power diplomacy 1814–1914* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1992); Roy Bridge and Roger Bullen, *The Great Powers and the European states system, 1814–1914*, 2nd edn (London: Longman & Pearson, 2005); René Albrecht-Carrié, *The Concert of Europe 1815–1914* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1968).

<sup>25</sup> Paul W. Schroeder, *Austria, Great Britain, and the Crimean War: the destruction of the European Concert* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1972).

<sup>26</sup> Henry A. Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1995), ch. 5.

<sup>27</sup> See R. J. Crampton, ‘The decline of the Concert of Europe in the Balkans, 1913–1914’, *Slavonic and East European Review* 52: 128, July 1974, pp. 393–419.

<sup>28</sup> Hajo Holborn, *The political collapse of Europe* (New York: Knopf, 1951), ch. 3.

<sup>29</sup> A. G. Kennwood and A. L. Lougheed, *The growth of the international economy 1820–2000* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 61–77; see also Carl Strikwerda, ‘The troubled origins of European economic integration: international iron and steel and labor migration in the era of World War I’, *American Historical Review* 98: 4, Oct. 1993, pp. 1106–29; Paul Schroeder, ‘Economic integration and the European international system’, *American Historical Review* 98: 4, Oct. 1993, pp. 1130–38.

economic growth to the opportunities provided by this international economic order. But this order was already in retreat by 1914: since 1890, tariffs had been reintroduced in all European states and in the United States in order to support national industries and to raise money for the growing government establishments.<sup>30</sup> Germany did not play a unique role in the erosion of the international economic order; it was destroyed by parliaments and governments in all capitals. The result was a declining share of exports in the overall economic activity of the major European powers.<sup>31</sup>

To sum up, the theory of ‘Thucydides’ trap’ does not provide any real explanatory power in the quest to understand the dynamics that led to the outbreak of the First World War, and it provides only limited assistance in predicting the probability of a major war in East Asia. It does help us to identify a few of the relevant independent variables; however, these are of such a general nature that their operational value remains limited. These variables boil down to: (1) the existence of established powers; (2) the existence of rising and emerging powers; and to some extent (3) the existence of an international order which is under dispute. Trying to explain the outbreak of wars by resorting to these generalities does not lead too far. It is reasonable to assume that whenever we find an international political constellation in which there are established and rising powers which are in competition (over the right international order or over influence in general), one should be concerned about the possibility of an outbreak of war. This is the basic message of the theory of Thucydides’ trap. With regard to the rise of China, it means that one should be concerned in a very general way about the danger of war. But it does not have much to offer in assessing the likelihood of a major war in East Asia, in particular with a view to the many potential theatres to be found there.

### **In search of a broader set of variables**

To find more valuable tools to help in gauging the probability of war in today’s East Asia, it is useful to widen the investigation to consider a broader set of variables, relating in particular to the nature of the international system, the existence of nationalism, and the respective roles of military strategies, doctrines, forces and force multipliers; of geography and the dynamics of war; and of international institutions. In these areas there are lessons to be learned from the experience of the First World War that could be applied to the current situation.

### *The nature of the international system*

The outbreak of the First World War has to be seen against the backdrop of the development of the international system in the early twentieth century.<sup>32</sup> As noted

<sup>30</sup> Kennwood and Lougheed, *The growth of the international economy*, p. 71.

<sup>31</sup> Karl W. Deutsch and Alexander Eckstein, ‘National industrialization and the declining share of the international economic sector, 1890–1959’, *World Politics* 13: 2, Jan. 1961, pp. 267–99.

<sup>32</sup> See Paul M. Kennedy, ‘The First World War and the international power system’, *International Security* 9: 1, Summer 1984, pp. 7–40.

above, the international system of that period was characterized by the decay of a European security order that for many decades had been able to prevent (or at least constrain) the use of military force among major powers. The system established in 1815 was an ‘anarchic society’;<sup>33</sup> however, by the end of the nineteenth century this had turned into outright anarchy.<sup>34</sup> The unification of Germany in 1871 was achieved at a time when the system created some half a century earlier was no longer functioning. Bismarck understood the precariousness of the international constellation and revitalized the European order; but after his resignation in 1890 this revived order fell apart once more.<sup>35</sup> The collapse of the European order was registered by many politicians and observers at that time, but very few attempts were made to re-establish it. Eventually, anarchy and self-help prevailed. But how did anarchy translate into the outbreak of war? And what can be learned from that process that can illuminate today’s situation?

The First World War was the product of an international constellation in which one of the major powers (the German empire) had been more or less isolated (together with Austria-Hungary, which was an unreliable and militarily feeble ally, and Italy, which counted even less) and outnumbered by an alliance encompassing France, Russia and Great Britain. While the United Kingdom was a status quo power (at least with regard to Europe), France and Russia pursued—to different degrees and with different intentions—revisionist aims and were, in principle, ready to use force in pursuance of their ambitions. Germany’s interest in Europe was primarily oriented towards preserving the status quo on the continent, but it also wanted to be recognized as a global power (*Weltmacht*) with colonies and influence in all parts of the world (*Weltpolitik*). It wanted to be on the same footing as Britain and France.

This constellation was conducive to the outbreak of war, since all sides contributed more or less wittingly to its escalation. French policy oscillated between a revisionist and a defensive orientation.<sup>36</sup> France wanted to regain Alsace and Lorraine, and some French politicians wished to destroy altogether the Prussian-led German empire, which had been created in 1871 after Prussia’s victory in the war against France. However, French politicians were also aware of the fact that Germany was growing faster than France in terms of both population and economy, and that their country needed the reassurance of alliance with strong partners. This, however, entangled France in the far-reaching geopolitical ambitions of Russia. The tsar and his government wanted to unite the Slavic nations under Russian tutelage and considered Austria-Hungary and Germany to be the main obstacles preventing the achievement of this goal. Germany could

<sup>33</sup> This concept was framed by Hedley Bull, *The anarchic society: a study of order in world politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

<sup>34</sup> Paul Schroeder, ‘The 19th-century international system: changes in the structure’, *World Politics* 39: 1, Oct. 1986, pp. 1–26.

<sup>35</sup> See Hildebrand, *Das vergangene Reich*, chs 1–4. According to George F. Kennan, this order had already been damaged by the Franco-Russian alliance; see George F. Kennan, *The decline of Bismarck’s European order. Franco-Russian relations, 1875–1890* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

<sup>36</sup> See René Albrecht-Carrié, *France, Europe and the two world wars* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1961), pp. 29–41; John F. V. Keiger, *France and the origins of the First World War* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1983).

have defused this situation by continuing with the cautious and balanced diplomacy of Bismarck. However, Germany's foreign policy after 1890 was erratic, led by nationalist sentiment and reflecting an overestimation of its capabilities. Imperial Germany made strategic choices with catastrophic consequences (such as the pursuit of naval armaments, leading to the alienation of Britain and the quest for German colonies). Many individuals in the German political elite saw the danger of growing isolation, but any policy of *rapprochement* with Britain foundered on scepticism, resentment and ignorance.<sup>37</sup>

The war eventually broke out over a (state-sponsored) terrorist incident, which under normal conditions would have given rise to, at worst, a limited regional war in Eastern Europe; certainly not to a major conflict. Diplomatic initiatives were rapidly put in train to solve the crisis, and recourse was had to informal institutions, such as the family ties between various rulers, in attempts to induce moderation; but working against these were influential forces on all sides that viewed a major war as an opportunity, or as a goal in itself, or as simply unavoidable, giving rise to a political and military dynamic that brought about the eventual disastrous outcome. The chain of events that led to the First World War continued after the assassination of the archduke with the Austrian artillery fire on Belgrade of 28 July 1914, which was followed by Russia announcing a general mobilization on 30 July, which was answered by Germany declaring war on Russia and France, and a resultant military campaign by Germany deep into France in violation of Belgian neutrality, which then brought Britain into the war. The subsequent four years and more of war left behind 8.6 million dead soldiers, about 5 million dead civilians, and more than 22 million wounded soldiers.<sup>38</sup> The economic damage was immense—the war cost more than US\$208 billion (or the equivalent of more than 1 trillion German *Reichsmark*).<sup>39</sup> Immediately after the end of the war, a major flu epidemic took an additional toll among those who had survived, killing up to 50 million people in 1918, 1919 and 1920.<sup>40</sup>

What induced the German leadership in early August 1914 to declare war on Russia and France and immediately invade Belgium and France? Germany saw itself in a position of mid- to long-term inferiority and strategic vulnerability, and put all its hopes into a strategy of pre-emption. Already in the spring of 1914 and also earlier in 1912, Helmuth von Moltke, the German Chief of Staff, had pleaded for a preventive war, since he saw no other way for Germany to solve the conundrum. The German strategic position was indeed quite disadvantageous. There were several factors contributing to this situation:<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> See Hildebrand, *Das vergangene Reich*, pp. 213–21. One individual who demanded a German–British *rapprochement*, but then faltered, was the longstanding *éminence grise* of the German Foreign Office, Friedrich von Holstein; see Norman Rich and M. H. Fisher, eds, *The Holstein papers: the memoirs, diaries and correspondence of Friedrich von Holstein* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), ch. 9.

<sup>38</sup> Figures according to Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World\\_War\\_I\\_casualties](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_I_casualties), accessed 8 Oct. 2014.

<sup>39</sup> Figures according to Broadberry and Broadberry, *The economics of World War One*. In 1920 the German government published a sum of 1,037,942,000,000 *Reichsmark* as the amount spent for all war expenses.

<sup>40</sup> Jeffery K. Taubenberger and David Morens, '1918 influenza: the mother of all pandemics', *Emerging Infectious Disease Journal* 12: 1, Jan. 2006, pp. 15–22.

<sup>41</sup> See Christopher Clark, *The sleepwalkers: how Europe went to war in 1914* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013); Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (London: Penguin, 2005); David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: the First World War as*

- Since 1907 it had faced a triple alliance consisting of France, Russia and Britain, which left Germany hopelessly outnumbered.
- In 1911 France changed its military strategy from an overall defensive orientation to one of strategic offence.
- Russia was beginning to expand its railway system in Poland and—given the crucial role of railway systems for launching major military offensive operations—was hence within a decade of posing a new strategically relevant threat to the German Reich.<sup>42</sup>
- The United Kingdom’s naval supremacy enabled it to seal off the export-oriented and import-dependent German economy from its sources of raw materials and food and from its export markets and colonies.

**Table 6: Industrial/technological comparisons of the major combatant states on the eve of the First World War**

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Germany+ Austria</i>	<i>France+Russia+UK</i>
Share of world manufacturing output (%), 1913	19.2	27.9
Energy consumption (million tonnes of coal), 1913	236.4	311.8
Steel production (million tons), 1913	20.2	17.1
Total industrial potential (index: UK in 1900 = 100)	178.4	261.1

*Source:* Paul M. Kennedy, ‘The First World War and the international power system’, *International Security* 9: 1, Summer 1984, pp. 7–40 at p. 21.

Thus the German grand strategy in the early phase of the First World War was marked by the wish to defeat France as fast as possible by a pre-emptive strike and to achieve a negotiating position that would allow it to conclude a sustainable peace to free Germany from its encirclement (*Behauptungsfrieden*, as Moltke called it). At least in July and August 1914, the hope was to crush the French armed forces by dint of a fast strike; but there was no interest in taking over France or conquering major parts of it.<sup>43</sup> Given the overall correlation of forces, Germany and its allies were outnumbered from the beginning in terms of soldiers, weaponry, economic strength and human capital (see tables 6 and 7 as well as tables 4 and 5).<sup>44</sup>

*political tragedy* (New York: Basic Books, 2004); Richard F. Hamilton and Holger W. Herwig, *Decisions for war 1914–1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Holger Herwig, ed., *The outbreak of World War I: causes and responsibilities* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997); David G. Herrmann, *The arming of Europe and the making of the First World War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Barbara W. Tuchman, *The guns of August* (London: Macmillan, 1962).

<sup>42</sup> See David Stevenson, ‘War by timetable? The railway race before 1914’, *Past and Present* 162: 1, 1999, pp. 163–94.

<sup>43</sup> Von Moltke made this point in various writings between 1914 and his death in 1916. They can be found in *Helmuth von Moltke 1848–1916. Dokumente zu seinem Leben und Wirken*, vol. 1, ed. Thomas Meyer (Basle: Perseus, 1993), pp. 303–308, 391–403, 462–6.

<sup>44</sup> See Broadberry and Broadberry, *The economics of World War One*, p. 2.

**Table 7: Combined world power index, selected years prior to the First World War**

Country	1900	1905	1910	1913
Austria-Hungary	6	6	6	6
France	10	9	9	9
Germany	16	16	17	18
Italy	5	4	4	4
Russia	15	16	18	18
United Kingdom	20	15	14	14

*Note:* Figures are taken from the Correlates of War Project and represent a combination of various indices encompassing population, urban population, energy consumption, steel production, military expenditures and military personnel.

*Source:* James Lee Ray, *Global politics* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), p. 106.

Germany's only realistic chance of success lay in carrying through its offensive of August–September 1914 by catching France—its most important military rival—relatively unprepared and moving into Paris or sealing off the French capital from the north of France.<sup>45</sup> But France was not as unprepared as the German military leadership had hoped—and it had mighty friends. The German offensive failed halfway, and as a result Moltke stepped down as Chief of Staff.

This interpretation of German war aims is not universally accepted. In the scholarly literature there is still a division over the nature of the war aims, ranging from authors who basically share the view that this was a war of pre-emption or a preventive war<sup>46</sup> to those who assert that the German leadership was pursuing a premeditated, wide-ranging aggressive and hegemonic agenda with the aim of ruling Europe. In Germany the latter argument is mainly made by adherents of the 'Fischer School'.<sup>47</sup> Fischer based his argument on a paper from September 1914, which could be interpreted as reflecting far-reaching war aims on the part of the then Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg. However, as other authors have noted, the official status of that document was never clarified.<sup>48</sup> It was difficult to find indications of a systematic German political discourse, before the summer of 1914, centred on the domination of Europe, although there were influential groups in the German political establishment who were pursuing an imperialist agenda. Most political debates in the years preceding 1914 focused on how to overcome the isolation of Germany in Europe and how to be accepted

<sup>45</sup> Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds, *Great War, total war: combat and mobilization on the Western Front, 1914–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>46</sup> Paul Schroeder, 'World War One as Galloping Gertie: a reply to Joachim Remak', *Journal of Modern History* 44: 2, Sept. 1972, pp. 319–44; see also Robert Harkavy, *Preemption and two-front conventional warfare* (Jerusalem: Leonard Davis Institute for International Relations, 1977). Herrmann, in *The arming of Europe*, p. 210, claims that the preventive war hypothesis was a kind of exaggeration against the backdrop that most European actors were more or less ready for war or considered the outbreak of war as imminent and unavoidable.

<sup>47</sup> See e.g. Fritz Fischer, *War of illusions: German policies from 1911 to 1914* (New York: Norton, 1975); Fritz Fischer, Lancelot L. Farrar, Robert Kimber and Rita Kimber, *World power or decline: the controversy over Germany's aims in the First World War* (New York: Norton, 1974).

<sup>48</sup> See Stevenson, *Cataclysm*, p. 105.

as a world power outside Europe. In particular, the debates within the German parliament (*Reichstag*) became increasingly critical with regard to the militarization of German foreign policy and the quest for global reach (*Weltpolitik*) after Social Democrats, Centrists and Liberals won a majority in the election of 1912. Meanwhile, the divisions among the different schools have somewhat lessened.<sup>49</sup> A more moderate contemporary version of the Fischer School argues that Germany's government bore the main responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War, as it initiated the major offensive campaign into Belgium and France.<sup>50</sup> This argument is shared in its essentials by those authors who point to the pre-emptive nature of the German military campaign against France, and hence provides a bridge between the different schools. Disagreement still exists over the responsibility of the other European capitals in allowing the overall diplomatic situation preceding the war to deteriorate in such a way that a major conflict became a real possibility. But here too the differences seem to be diminishing.<sup>51</sup> Henry Kissinger, for instance, called the international diplomacy of the early twentieth century a 'doomsday machine' with many culprits.<sup>52</sup>

There is also another school of thinking, which argues that all major actors in 1914 had offensive military doctrines and strategies and that, in principle, everyone favoured war over peace.<sup>53</sup> In fact, at that time the dominant belief among military leaders was that the offensive was the best way towards victory.<sup>54</sup> Offensive war strategies also fitted very well with nationalism and so were quite popular. However, as Scott Sagan rightly pointed out, the fact that all armies had offensive strategies does not itself suffice to explain strategic instabilities or the outbreak of war. What made the crucial difference was the interplay of offensive strategies, doctrinal skills and strategic vulnerabilities.<sup>55</sup> In early August 1914, it was not only Germany that went onto the offensive: Russia, Austria and France started simultaneous offensive military operations, too. The difference was, however, that none of these countries had any major success in its offensive operations. Russia made some territorial gains in East Prussia, but these were not strategically decisive. France was attacking Germany in Alsace-Lorraine; however, it was not able to push through German defences. Austria's offensive against Serbia was doomed to fail from the beginning. Russia's offensive against Austria had

<sup>49</sup> See Annika Mombauer, 'The Fischer controversy 50 years on', *Journal of Contemporary History* 48: 2, April 2013, pp. 231–40; also Steinberg, 'Old knowledge and new research'.

<sup>50</sup> Annika Mombauer, *The origins of the First World War: controversies and consensus* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), and *Helmuth von Moltke and the origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>51</sup> See Mombauer, 'The Fischer controversy 50 years on', p. 233; Steinberg, 'Old knowledge and new research', p. 245.

<sup>52</sup> Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, ch. 7; Clark, *Sleepwalkers*; Hamilton and Herwig, *Decisions for war*, pp. 70–91; Herrmann, *The arming of Europe*; James Joll, *The origins of the First World War* (London and New York: Longman, 1984); William Mulligan, *The origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Stevenson, *Cataclysm*.

<sup>53</sup> See Jack Snyder, 'Better now than later: the paradox of 1914 as everyone's favored year for war', *International Security* 39: 1, Summer 2014, pp. 71–94.

<sup>54</sup> See Jack Snyder, *The ideology of the offensive: military decision-making and the disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984); Steven Van Evera, 'The cult of the offensive and the origins of the First World War', *International Security* 9: 1, Summer 1984, pp. 58–107.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Scott D. Sagan, '1914 revisited: allies, offense and instability', *International Security* 11: 2, Autumn 1986, pp. 151–75.

some limited successes, but these were mainly attributable to the weaknesses in Austria's defence. Even the Moltke war plan (which was based on a memorandum his predecessor Schlieffen had written in 1905), while more successful than the respective French, Russian and Austrian plans, was not sufficiently successful—at least in German eyes.<sup>56</sup> It led to a stalemate that ushered in a long and bloody war of attrition on the Western Front.

When we look at present-day Asia we do not see too many similarities with the Europe of 1914. China is not isolated in a sense comparable to Germany between 1890 and 1914. China has no real 'friends' either in the region or beyond, but its loneliness does not entail strategic vulnerabilities. It is certainly hard to conceive of the 'isolation' of a country like China, with territory the size of a continent and 1.3 billion citizens. China does not face an overwhelming coalition of enemies harbouring open or disguised plans to intervene in the country. And even if such a coalition existed, it would be nowhere near capable of inflicting strategically relevant damage on China. There is no coalition of forces imaginable that could conquer major parts of China or invade the country's political and economic centres. The only real threat that Chinese leaders might fear today is that of the United States cutting China's maritime links, although the realization of this threat is imaginable only under extreme circumstances. *Hence, there is no reason to assume that the same sense of isolation and lingering military defeat observed in Berlin in 1914 might repeat itself in Beijing, either today or in the foreseeable future.* There is no trend in sight which could lead China eventually to launch a pre-emptive war out of a sense of being isolated, strategically vulnerable and subject to a detrimental shift in the correlation of forces. Today's Beijing is definitely not the 'new Berlin'.

However, there might be other states that feel isolated and could make decisions, within the context of a serious crisis, with potentially devastating consequences. The first to mention is North Korea, which is constantly isolating itself and is militarily and politically extremely vulnerable. Even with its conventional forces (leaving aside its nuclear weapons), the leadership in Pyongyang has the potential to trigger a major war in the region. But other states too should be considered. First and foremost Taiwan, which, in view of current Chinese military preparations, will have to make a choice between two options within the next two decades: either to seek an amicable understanding with Beijing, leading eventually to absorption into mainland China, or to go after nuclear weapons. Japan, too, might feel isolated if it felt that China was growing in military strength while its guarantee of US support was becoming less reliable—although whether such isolation might result in decisions that could trigger a major war is a different matter. There is also significant uncertainty as to the role of nuclear weapons. Will they freeze conflicts and preserve the status quo, as Kenneth Waltz argued,<sup>57</sup> or will they add to instability?

<sup>56</sup> The best analysis of the German war plans before the First World War can be found in Terence Zuber, *The real German war plan 1904–14* (Stroud: History Press, 2011). The author is a former military officer, who is familiar with the intricacies of analysing military planning; he draws on hitherto unused archive material.

<sup>57</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *The spread of nuclear weapons: more may better*, Adelphi Paper no. 171 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981).

### *The prevalence of nationalism and social Darwinism*

One salient feature of Europe a century ago was the prevalence of nationalism, imperialism and social Darwinism in all European societies, not just in Germany.<sup>58</sup> It was these forces that prevented the war coming to an earlier end. What distinguishes the First World War so radically is not only the manner of its beginning in summer 1914, but its continuance with such fervour and ferocity for more than four years during which it seemed impossible to terminate it. By December 1914 it was obvious that neither side could win this war by continuing with a military campaign. But, instead of negotiating a ceasefire and trying to find a political solution to the conflict at this point, each side wanted to continue the war until the other was exhausted. Consequently, the war aims of all parties became increasingly expansive and aggressive.<sup>59</sup> In early 1915, the conflict turned into a total war, in which all resources of the belligerent nations were mobilized in pursuit of victory at any price. All human, agricultural, industrial and intellectual resources were mobilized to this end by both coalitions; and the belligerent parties on both sides had huge industrial capacities to continue the war.<sup>60</sup>

This kind of collective insanity was unparalleled in European history. It was the main reason why this war became so bloody and subsequently was named the 'Great War'. Unlike the outbreak of the war, for which Germany bore the main responsibility, the Entente Powers were arguably most responsible for its continuation, for they saw themselves as being stronger than the Central Powers in the long term. An offer of a ceasefire and subsequent negotiations made by the Central Powers in December 1916—albeit half-heartedly—was an initiative that could have been taken up, at least to stop the carnage on the battlefields. The Entente Powers flatly rejected it.<sup>61</sup> They never made a similar attempt to end the war short of demanding capitulation.

Eventually, the losers were those states whose economies could no longer sustain the war effort and whose populations became frustrated with the war itself. The first to capitulate was Russia, followed by Austria-Hungary and finally Germany. In terms of economic strength and popular mood, Britain and France were not much better off at that time; however, the support they received from

<sup>58</sup> Holborn, *The political collapse of Europe*, ch. 3.

<sup>59</sup> Stevenson, *Cataclysm*, ch. 5.

<sup>60</sup> See Chickering and Förster, eds, *Great War, total war*; also Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among nations: the struggle for power and peace*, 3rd edn (New York: Knopf, 1963), ch. 22. An excellent analysis of the economy of both the First and Second World Wars was written as soon as the early 1940s by the Swedish economist H. G. Tonndorf; see his book *Krieg der Fabriken. Über das Kriegsführungspotential der kriegsführenden Mächte* (Zurich and New York: Europa, 1943). This kind of industrial warfare had already been predicted by the Russian banker and economist Ivan Bloch in the late nineteenth century: see Ivan S. Bloch, *Is war now impossible?* (London: Grant Richards, 1899). This book was an abridged version of a six-volume work he had published earlier in Russian and German.

<sup>61</sup> The text of the initiative was reproduced in André Scherer and Jacques Grunewald, *L'Allemagne et les problèmes de la paix pendant la première guerre mondiale. Documents extraits des archives de l'Office allemand des Affaires étrangères* (Paris: Sorbonne, 1962), vol. 1, pp. 609ff. (no. 416); for an assessment from the perspective of the Entente Powers, see Zbynek Zeman, *The break-up of the Habsburg empire* (London and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 123. For a more recent assessment, see Stevenson, *Cataclysm*, p. 103; also H. E. Goemans, *War and punishment: the causes of war termination and the First World War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 16.

the United States eventually made the difference between victory and defeat.<sup>62</sup> The enormous losses in lives of young men that these societies were ready to accept, as well as the huge cooperative efforts undertaken by all parts of society to support the military, gave this war a special character: it should be called a modern, democratic war, since without the broad support of the combatant nations' publics, as well as of their elites, such a war would not have been possible.

The First World War demonstrated the enormous risks involved when highly industrialized nation-states (with more or less successfully functioning democratic institutions) go to war against one another, in particular when their political elites and large segments of their populations adhere to strong nationalist sentiments. What happened between 1914 and 1918 had been predicted more than 100 years earlier by Friedrich Gentz, a German political writer of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and close adviser to the Austrian Chancellor Klemens von Metternich. As early as 1800, in a critique of Immanuel Kant's paper on eternal peace, he wrote that the democratic French Revolution had set free new sources and levels of violence, a new sense of total victory and new resources for continuing war over long periods.<sup>63</sup> Originally, only revolutionary France was able to make use of these new forces. But soon other nations followed. What this meant in the early nineteenth century could be seen from the 'Battle of the Nations' near Leipzig in October 1813. It was the largest battle that had ever occurred in European history up to that point and it presented a foretaste of what could happen later.<sup>64</sup> Under conditions of industrialization and modern statehood, the consequences of warfare among democracies were to be even more destructive than Gentz could have imagined at the beginning of the nineteenth century. What Gentz observed, by the way, was totally incompatible with the theory of democratic peace, which claims that democracies do not fight wars against each other.<sup>65</sup> According to Gentz, democracies might on occasion be more dangerous than non-democratic states. In fact, it might have been the confluence of democratization with nationalism, racism and social Darwinism in the second half of the nineteenth century that led to the emergence of societies ready to sacrifice everything in order to save the nation from any alleged threat by 'heinous adversaries'.<sup>66</sup>

A special responsibility lay with the political elites of all European states, among whom nationalism, racism and social Darwinism were very strong influences. These elites were to a large extent drawn from the aristocracy, and feared

<sup>62</sup> See David Stevenson, *With our backs to the wall: victory and defeat in 1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>63</sup> His article 'Über den ewigen Frieden' (1800) was reprinted in Friedrich von Gentz, *Revolution und Gleichgewicht. Politische Schriften*, ed. Hans Jörg Hennecke (Waltrop and Leipzig: Manuscriptum, 2010), pp. 289–333.

<sup>64</sup> See Peter Hofschroer, *Leipzig 1813: the battle of the nations* (Oxford: Osprey, 1993).

<sup>65</sup> Bruce Russett, *Grasping the democratic peace: principles for a post-Cold War world* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); for a critical assessment of the utility of the theory of democratic peace for explaining the past, see Ido Oren, 'The subjectivity of the "democratic" peace: changing US perceptions of imperial Germany', *International Security* 20: 2, Fall 1995, pp. 147–84; see also David E. Spiro, 'The insignificance of the liberal peace', *International Security* 19: 2, Fall 1994, pp. 50–86; Christopher Layne, 'Kant or cant: the myth of the democratic peace', *International Security* 19: 2, Fall 1994, pp. 5–49.

<sup>66</sup> See Alfred Vagts, *A history of militarism* (New York: Meridian, 1959), chs 6–8.

middle-class and working-class competitors for power. While in many states the aristocratic elites had made their peace with the middle class, both were afraid of losing power to socialist forces. This made them susceptible to nationalism and imperialism as means to stabilize (or pacify) the domestic environment.<sup>67</sup> In the case of Austria-Hungary, they were under pressure not only from other classes but also from representatives of nationalities seeking independence from the imperial power.

Nationalism, racism and social Darwinism became the glue holding together societies that otherwise would have disintegrated under the pressure of huge differences in terms of income and wealth. As a consequence, the dominant social construction of political reality (in particular of international relations) became increasingly shaped by notions of nationalism, enmity towards outsiders, war, cultures of strength and militarism, and a sense of international anarchy. By means of this narrative, domestic debates could be constrained and the quest of socialist and progressive parties for a share of power contained.

In present-day Asia, nationalist and racist thinking is often to be found among elites and media, but these forces are not so strong as they were in Europe 100 years ago. Nevertheless, if we consider the highly emotional reactions, in particular in China, to the most recent crisis over the uninhabited island of Senkaku (which the Chinese call Diaoyutai), it is possible that nationalist and social Darwinist thinking might increase in East Asia and might drive governments into political and military decisions they would later regret. So far, however, most outbreaks of public feeling have been the result of deliberate efforts by governments to demonstrate the seriousness of their concerns to the world.

The big issue is whether these undercurrents of feeling could be translated into a readiness on the part of societies at large to sustain a lengthy war effort. Such a development cannot be excluded, but for the time being it does not look likely to occur in the near future. If it ever were to happen, such devastating forces of unlimited destructiveness would be unleashed only if a seemingly limited war had already broken out with major losses on all sides.

### *The dynamics of military competition*

In considering conflict situations, it is always helpful to look at military postures, doctrines and strategies and to think in terms of possible avenues of action and counter-action, of escalation and de-escalation, of offensive, defensive, pre-emptive and preventive war. It is important to take into account issues relating to armed forces, technologies and geography as well as the readiness and ability of societies to sustain war efforts for long periods.

<sup>67</sup> See more recently Jack Beatty, *The lost history of 1914: how the Great War was not inevitable* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012); Wolfgang Mommsen, *Imperial Germany 1867–1918: politics, culture, and society in an authoritarian state* (London: Arnold, 1995); Geoffrey Best, 'The militarization of European societies, 1870–1914', in John Gillis, ed., *The militarization of the western world* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), pp. 13–44; Dietrich Geyer, *Russian imperialism: the interaction of domestic and foreign policy 1860–1914* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987). See also Vagts, *A history of militarism*, pp. 249–65; Harold D. Laski, *Reflections on the revolutions of our time* (New York: Viking, 1943); Schumpeter, 'Sociology of imperialism'.

Particular emphasis should be given to existing or perceived strategic vulnerability.<sup>68</sup> This was a decisive factor in the outbreak of the First World War. Germany's decision to initiate war against Belgium and France was mainly driven by the perception that it was outnumbered and strategically vulnerable. Since France also had strategic vulnerabilities, the German general staff tried to exploit them in August 1914 by taking the military initiative against their neighbour. Germany's strategic vulnerabilities resulted from the geography of Central Europe in combination with the mobility and firepower of armed forces: the German capital of Berlin was just 350 kilometres away from the border with Poland (which at that time belonged to Russia). The heartland of German economic strength, the Rhineland, was in similar close reach of French troops, and Paris—the political and economic hub of France—was also only 350 kilometres away from the German border. Such strategic vulnerabilities created nervousness and, under conditions of a major international crisis, translated into a readiness to take enormous risks and to start a pre-emptive military offensive. Thus speed of mobilization and readiness to seize the initiative became important factors in the sequence of events in 1914.

In Asia today, the situation is different from that prevailing in Europe in 1914. East Asia is much larger than Europe, and there is no geographical proximity between strategic competitors that could translate into mutual vulnerabilities of the kind that arose between Germany and France. The risks of being exposed to strategic surprise resulting from rapid military movements on the ground are in general much lower in Asia than in Europe. Europe has always been a continent of short distances, and there are only very few natural barriers against military campaigns on land. Asia is much larger and, aside from the huge distances, there are many natural barriers (mountains, seas) that would have to be overcome. Today, certainly, geographical distances are being overcome by the mobility and versatility of military air power, but land armies are still the only forces that can conquer and hold territories. That does not imply that military confrontation will not take place. But it is relatively unlikely that a major war will unfold because one of the major actors in the region sees itself strategically in a situation of unbearable vulnerability, thus prompting it to make a decisive pre-emptive strike.

However, to say that neither China, Japan nor the United States is in a situation of strategic vulnerability is not to say that there are no strategic vulnerabilities at all. Although Asian geography is fundamentally different from that of Europe, it is useful to look at strategic vulnerabilities and incentives for pre-emptive wars at regional or subregional level. Here two different theatres need to be subjected to closer scrutiny: first, the Korean peninsula; and second, the disputed maritime areas of the South China Sea and the East China Sea. In these theatres, vulnerabilities and pre-emptive strike incentives are already existent, or are emerging. Any one of these could theoretically lead to a major military exchange and could even result in a major war involving both the US and China and possibly others as well.

Another factor that could change the whole equation is the availability of nuclear weapons. Today, nuclear weapons play only a limited role in the region,

<sup>68</sup> See Sagan, '1914 revisited'.

mainly because the United States has removed most of its theatre nuclear forces, including from its naval vessels, and because China still has a nuclear doctrine which is defensive in orientation and directed at strategic deterrence. In fact, there is an element of basic strategic deterrence involved in the relationship between the US and China (including also Japan and South Korea), which has an overall reassuring effect on the situation in East Asia. But this might change if nuclear proliferation (horizontal as well as vertical) progresses.

*The situation on the Korean peninsula.* The Korean peninsula is the part of East Asia where strategic vulnerabilities exist with a huge potential for further escalation. On this peninsula is to be found the greatest concentration of armed forces anywhere in the world. North Korea has about 1,190,000 soldiers on active duty (with about 5,000 main battle tanks, more than 21,000 pieces of artillery and 600 fighting aircraft), South Korea about 655,000 soldiers (with about 2,599 main battle tanks, almost 12,000 pieces of artillery and about 580 fighting aircraft), supported by 28,500 US soldiers.<sup>69</sup> This situation entails risks of pre-emptive offensive land operations, with the aim on the part of the initiator of reducing its own vulnerabilities and taking advantage of those of the opposing side. Either side's initiating such a military operation might trigger off a chain of events that could even draw in the US and China on opposite sides of the front.

The North Korean army—despite its numerical superiority—has no chance of winning a protracted conventional war against the combined South Korean and US forces. However, it could be tempted to seize sizeable parts of South Korea in a surprise attack and threaten to use nuclear weapons if the other side were to attempt to reclaim that territory. The capital of South Korea is little more than 25 kilometres from the border with North Korea; this fact poses a huge incentive for North Korea to attempt such a daring act. However, since both the South Korean and the US armed forces are well aware of the potential for such action, many precautionary measures have been taken, such as the mining of the probable access routes, the permanent supervision of the border by aerial and satellite reconnaissance and signal intelligence, and a permanent search for secret tunnel projects.

But similar incentives might also exist on the South Korean side. This country sees itself as threatened by the aggressive and unpredictable North Korean leadership, which itself has many vulnerabilities. South Korea is in a process of modernizing its armed forces in order to make them compatible and interoperable with US forces, a process reflected in rapidly increasing defence expenditures. The country is currently spending five times what it was in 1990, and its expenditure on defence has tripled since 2000. The South Korean Defence Reform Plan 2020 calls for 'a futuristic force structure' reflecting 'the revolutionary changes in the war fighting paradigm triggered by the development of information-science and technology'. The aim is network-centred warfare and the investments are impressive: the

<sup>69</sup> Figures according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The military balance 2014* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 254–60.

country is procuring airborne early warning and control systems, C4I capabilities, new battle tanks, F-15/F/K-X aircraft and precision-guided munitions. These acquisitions will radically change the balance of forces on the peninsula. South Korea has not yet achieved all its goals, and there are still many gaps in its military capabilities (in particular in reconnaissance and early warning); but the gaps have been identified and one by one will be closed. The defence budget is to increase by 7 per cent a year to 2020, and already South Korea is considered by the International Institute for Strategic Studies to possess one of the best-equipped and most capable armed forces in Asia.<sup>70</sup>

The salient fact is that South Korea is achieving increasingly independent operational control over its armed forces. For decades, it was virtually unable to operate alone, with the US providing most of the operational control. Today the situation is changing. In 2007, the US and South Korea agreed that the latter should be able to exercise full operational control throughout the entire Korean theatre by late 2011. This goal has not been achieved owing to budgetary restraints, but it has been agreed that by 2015 the South Koreans will not only be able to react in kind to any military provocation by the North Koreans, but will also be able to lead and win a full-scale war on the peninsula. The North Korean military has an impressive number of soldiers, but its equipment is seriously outdated, with mostly Soviet weapons of 1960s and 1970s vintage. They would have no chance against a modern South Korean Army practising network-centric warfare; even the threat of long-range artillery attacks directed against Seoul might disappear under conditions of South Korean air superiority.

In other words, it is imaginable that both North Korea and—in the future—also South Korea might see virtue in striking first with the intention of exploiting the strategic vulnerabilities of the other side and protecting their own. Whatever the outcome of any such move might be, it could eventually draw in both the US and China. Beijing and Washington would try to prevent a strategic defeat of either the North or the South. If a major war were to break out between the US and China, it could be the result of a war between North and South Korea. The Chinese and US governments are both aware of this danger; neither is keen on walking into this trap and neither sees a ‘tragic necessity’ to do so. This marks a clear difference in comparison to Europe in 1914. However, no one can predict the political dynamics of future political crises on the Korean peninsula or what kind of commitments China and the US may have made by the time any such crisis arises.

*Military competition over maritime areas.* When we look at naval competition between China, on the one side, and its regional neighbours (which often are at loggerheads with each other) on the other, there are at first glance hardly any similarities with the European situation in 1914. What we do see are constant attempts by the Chinese Navy to extend its control, step by step, over the South China Sea and the

<sup>70</sup> IISS, *The military balance 2014*, p. 257.

East China Sea.<sup>71</sup> This is arousing anger in Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore and Japan. There have been military incidents and clashes, but so far, the nature of naval warfare and the geographical framework have prevented these clashes from initiating a major war. Many observers do, nevertheless, fear that the conflicts over the control of areas in the South China Sea (which China is claiming in its entirety as part of its territorial waters)<sup>72</sup> and in the East China Sea (where the areas of dispute are more limited) have the potential to trigger a major armed conflict between China and its regional adversaries or even between China and the United States. As two authors recently put it: 'If not wisely managed, these disputes could bring East Asia's long peace to a premature and bloody end.'<sup>73</sup>

It is not the purpose of this article to go into the details of these regional maritime disputes, which on all sides are driven to a greater or lesser extent by legitimate interests in exploiting maritime resources.<sup>74</sup> The main issue at stake here is whether it is possible that these conflicts entail a military logic of escalation or of action and reaction that might bring about a major war. This problem has two aspects. The first is whether or not the naval 'salami-slicing' tactics being used by the Chinese armed forces and security forces could escalate into a major war between China and other states of the region. The second is whether the emerging military competition between the United States and China in the region might lead to an arms race or an armed confrontation between the two powers.

As to the first risk, it is quite unlikely that naval incidents, minor exchanges of fire or even fights between aircraft and ships will escalate into all-out war. Both geographical factors and the availability of forces in the region constrain the possibilities open to China, Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines for escalating conflict (either by invasion or by launching a massive air attack). The Chinese leadership is clearly well aware of this and is accordingly pursuing its ends by attempting to take one position after another in the South China Sea. Even in the East China Sea, the situation is not very different. Neither China nor Japan could invade the other or would dare to launch major bombing attacks against the other. The worst prospect is that of sea battles (supported by aircraft) fought over uninhabited islands, or commando raids launched with the intention of occupying such islands.

<sup>71</sup> For analyses of the background, see Leszek Buszynski, 'The South China Sea: oil, maritime claims, and US-China strategic rivalry', *Washington Quarterly* 35: 2, Spring 2012, pp. 139-56; Sarah Raine and Christian Le Mièrre, *Regional disorder: the South China Sea disputes* (London: Routledge, 2013); Mark J. Valencia, 'The East China Sea dispute—context, claims, issues, and possible solutions', *Asian Perspective* 31: 1, 2007, pp. 127-67; Mark J. Valencia, 'Energy and insecurity in Asia', *Survival* 39: 3, 1997, pp. 85-106; Mark J. Valencia, 'South China Sea: present and potential coastal area resource use conflicts', *Ocean Management* 5: 1, April 1979, pp. 1-38.

<sup>72</sup> This claim is tantamount to Imperial Germany claiming the Baltic Sea and the North Sea as territorial waters. Neither Kaiser Wilhelm II nor his ambitious Admiral Tirpitz ever had such an ambition.

<sup>73</sup> Alan Dupont and Christopher G. Baker, 'East Asia's maritime disputes: fishing in troubled waters', *Washington Quarterly* 37: 1, Spring 2014, pp. 79-98 at p. 79. Their concern is shared by Buszynski ('The South China Sea') and Raine and Le Mièrre ('Regional disorder'). There are, however, authors who warn against overrating the strategic relevance of these maritime disputes: see Brendan Taylor, 'The South China Sea is not a flashpoint', *Washington Quarterly* 37: 1, Spring 2014, pp. 99-111; Thomas Fingar and Fan Jishe, 'Ties that bind: strategic stability in the US-China relationship', *Washington Quarterly* 36: 4, Fall 2013, pp. 125-38.

<sup>74</sup> See Dupont and Baker, 'East Asia's maritime disputes'; John Lee, 'China's geostrategic search for oil', *Washington Quarterly* 35: 3, Summer 2012, pp. 75-92.

## *Evolving US–Chinese military competition*

Another subject—which deserves more attention—is the evolving military competition between the United States and China. There are risks involved here that stem from technological and strategic developments. This subject has been raised in scholarly literature during the past few years, and there are a growing number of authors who claim that there are escalation risks associated with it that cannot be ignored.<sup>75</sup> A similar debate has also been conducted within the US Department of Defense since the 1990s, giving rise to a new doctrinal concept—the air–sea battle.<sup>76</sup>

At the core of this debate is the notion of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD). *Anti-access* strategies (by China) have the aim of preventing forces of a certain state (the United States) from entering a theatre of operations, whether on land, in airspace or in a maritime area. This is what the Chinese call *active strategic counterattack on exterior lines* (ASCEL).<sup>77</sup> *Area denial* operations aim to prevent (mainly) US forces enjoying freedom of action within the narrower confines of a land or sea area.<sup>78</sup> Since the late 1990s, the US armed forces have been increasingly concerned about the emergence of Chinese maritime A2/AD capabilities in East Asia. The A2 threat lies mainly in the Chinese deployment of reconnaissance-strike complexes that allow it to pose a threat to fixed US installations in the region (and also US naval ships, in particular carrier groups). China has acquired these capabilities by investing in modern satellite as well as anti-satellite, in cyber and missile technology, and by improving its submarine technology. Meanwhile, China is on the verge of threatening US naval bases and ships within a range of more than 2,400 kilometres from the Chinese coastline with quite effective kinetic strikes. The AD threat is more short range in nature. It involves improved capabilities on the part of the Chinese air force to attack US naval ships with modern precision ammunition, to use integrated air-defence capabilities, and to employ intelligent mines and ship- and submarine-borne missiles to target manoeuvre forces.<sup>79</sup> The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) was able to acquire these capabilities by making huge investments in modern technology, emulating the modernization process on which US forces embarked 30 years ago. Today, the PLA operates in the air, on the water and under water, on land, in outer space and in cyberspace.

To a certain degree, the modernization of the PLA in its acquisition of A2/AD capabilities reflects a defensive strategy, aimed at fending off the presence of (mainly naval) US forces in what China considers its near abroad. However, given the regional context within which this modernization is taking place, its

<sup>75</sup> See Geoffrey Till, *Asia's naval expansion: an arms race in the making?* (Abingdon: Routledge for IISS, 2012).

<sup>76</sup> Department of the Army, Department of the Navy, Department of the Navy—Marine Corps, Department of the Air Force: *Air–sea battle: service collaboration to address anti-access and area denial challenges* (Washington DC: Department of Defense, May 2013).

<sup>77</sup> Aaron L. Friedberg, *Beyond air–sea battle: the debate over US military strategy in Asia* (Abingdon: Routledge for IISS, 2014), p. 25; Evan Braden Montgomery, 'Contested primacy in the western Pacific: China's rise and the future of US power projection', *International Security* 38: 4, Spring 2014, pp. 115–49, esp. 129–39.

<sup>78</sup> See Andrew Krepinevich, Barry Watts and Robert Work, *Meeting the anti-access and area-denial challenge* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment, 2003), p. 15.

<sup>79</sup> Christian Le Mière, 'The spectre of an Asian arms race', *Survival* 56: 1, Feb.–March 2014, pp. 139–56, p. 141.

overall strategic direction can be identified as offensive, as it is part of an attempt towards forcible enlargement of Chinese maritime territory—in the case of the South China Sea, in clear violation of the Law of the Sea Convention. Most of the states that have disputes with China over maritime areas are, in the meanwhile, also undertaking efforts to acquire their own A2/AD capabilities, albeit on a much more limited scale.

For the purpose of assessing the danger of war, the question of basic offensive or defensive orientation is of secondary relevance. What counts more are potential risks of crisis escalation and pre-emptive first strikes. Most observers point out not only the Chinese posture of A2/AD development, encompassing modern aircraft, submarines, ballistic and cruise missiles, fast attack boats, high-tech frigates and corvettes, but also the extremely high value China is placing on cyberspace, information warfare and anti-satellite warfare.<sup>80</sup> This combination of modernization and force multipliers entails a risk of incentives for first strikes. For the time being, most observers agree that a direct confrontation between the US and China remains unlikely,<sup>81</sup> but this might change. It may not be too far in the future that China's A2/AD capabilities allow it to inflict a decisive blow against the US military presence in East Asia, or at least create the perception on the part of the Chinese leadership that this is a real option. Some observers see the possibility that within the next decade the PLA might be able to inflict significant damage on all fixed installations that the US is using to sustain its military forces in the region.<sup>82</sup> It might, by the same token, be in a position to blind the main instruments of strategic intelligence and reconnaissance in the area and sink US naval ships, including aircraft carriers, within a 2,400-kilometre range of the Chinese coast. Taken together, these capabilities might result in some kind of 'Pearl Harbor' option, by which the Chinese military might be tempted to destroy most US military assets in the region by a multiplicity of coordinated strikes.<sup>83</sup>

It is hard to determine how great the risk is of this actually occurring. Primarily, it depends on the overall assessment of the international situation by the Chinese leadership, an assessment in which economic interdependence surely plays a crucial role, but where economic aspects could be deemed of secondary importance weighed against the possibility of achieving a major, decisive strategic gain—such as, for instance, the achievement of a radical shift in the balance of forces in East Asia by a single stroke. It also depends upon the possibility of China gaining a decisive edge in critical technological areas. This is difficult to predict, but in the field of cyber war and information war, major breakthroughs by one side are always a possibility.<sup>84</sup> It also depends on the nature of Chinese military doctrine.

<sup>80</sup> Roger Cliff, Mark Burles, Michael S. Chase, Derek Eaton and Kevin L. Pollpeter, *Entering the dragon's lair: the implications of Chinese antiaccess strategies* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2007); David Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's military: progress, problems and prospects* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>81</sup> Montgomery, 'Contested primacy in the western Pacific', p. 131.

<sup>82</sup> Friedberg, *Beyond air-sea battle*, p. 82; White, *The China choice*, p. 74.

<sup>83</sup> Jan van Tol with Mark Gunzinger, Andrew Krepinevich and Jim Thomas, *Air-sea battle: a point-of-departure operational concept* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010), pp. 20–21.

<sup>84</sup> See David C. Gompert and Martin Libicki, 'Cyber warfare and Sino-American instability', *Survival* 56: 4, Aug.–Sept. 2014, pp. 7–21.

Everything that is known about the Chinese ASCEL doctrine so far points to a preference for striking first, striking deep and hitting an enemy hard.<sup>85</sup> A doctrine is not a strategy, but strategies often follow doctrinal prescriptions. At the least, the United States will be faced with the choice between withdrawing its military assets from the region China claims as within its legitimate defence perimeter, or staying there and bearing the risk of being subjected to a disarming strike.<sup>86</sup>

There are, however, many convincing and cogent arguments that militate against this scenario. First and foremost, the overall strategic situation between China and the United States is characterized by growing mutual dependency and a common interest in stability. Both sides are, for many reasons, more interested in doing business, in achieving economic growth and in solving their respective economic and societal problems than in fomenting conflict.<sup>87</sup> Also, as stated above, China is not in a situation similar to that of Germany in 1914—it does not face a future ranged against a coalition with potentially overwhelming military power. These arguments notwithstanding, current observable Chinese policy with regard to the South China Sea and the East China Sea is characterized by unilateral military action, and by efforts to bully other littoral states of the South China Sea and to impose upon them solutions that will favour China. Seen from a liberal institutionalist perspective, Beijing appears to have every reason to pursue a peaceful and benign strategy; but it is actually pursuing a policy of gradual forcible transformation of the status quo and a marked disdain for the sovereignty of its neighbours.

Does this, then, imply that realist theory is right in assuming that the imperatives of force balancing are likely to prevail in the end?<sup>88</sup> This is the argument of Aaron Friedberg, who asserts that China wants to ‘become the dominant or preponderant power in East Asia and perhaps in Asia written large’.<sup>89</sup> There is certainly much evidence to support this hypothesis; however, the truth might be more nuanced. One observer, for instance, views the Chinese policy as an attempt to ‘demonstrate to Washington the unsustainability of the American position of having a good relationship with China and maintaining its alliances in Asia’.<sup>90</sup> If this is true, there may be room for US–Chinese strategic dialogue.<sup>91</sup>

Then there is also the nuclear element, which greatly complicates the whole equation.<sup>92</sup> The United States is currently superior to China in the field of strategic nuclear arms and might consider the use of nuclear weapons appropriate if China really had the nerve to more or less completely destroy the US military and naval presence within a corridor of 2,400 kilometres off the Chinese coast within a matter of hours. What matters most is how the Beijing leadership regards the readiness

<sup>85</sup> Friedberg, *Beyond air–sea battle*, p. 25.

<sup>86</sup> Montgomery, ‘Contested primacy in the western Pacific’, p. 139.

<sup>87</sup> See Fingar and Jishe, ‘Ties that bind’.

<sup>88</sup> Mearsheimer, ‘The gathering storm’; Robert D. Kaplan, ‘The geography of Chinese power: how far can Beijing reach on land and at sea?’, *Foreign Affairs* 89: 3, May–June 2010, pp. 22–41.

<sup>89</sup> Friedberg, *A contest for supremacy*, p. 157.

<sup>90</sup> Hugh White, as quoted by the *New York Times*: see Cooper and Perlez, ‘US sway in Asia is imperilled’.

<sup>91</sup> White, *The China choice*, p. 61.

<sup>92</sup> See Stephen J. Cimbala, ‘Anticipatory attacks: nuclear crisis stability in future Asia’, *Comparative Strategy* 27: 1, 2008, pp. 113–32.

of the US to respond massively to such a pre-emptive strike. The Japanese high command in 1941 knew that the pre-emptive strike against the US Navy in Pearl Harbor could provoke a massive war effort by the US; but they misjudged the US response, believing that the United States was weak and divided and on the road towards decline. US nuclear superiority might convince the Chinese leadership now that such a strike might backfire, but no one knows how the nuclear equation might have changed ten years hence. If China has a credible strategic nuclear deterrence capability against the United States, a US nuclear response to a non-nuclear Pearl Harbor-like strike might be seen as less likely.

The US debate on Chinese A2/AD capabilities has elicited many proposals for dealing with this problem. Some of them focus on counter-measures.<sup>93</sup> In 2012, a draft of a joint operational access concept was presented by the US armed forces. In May 2013 the air–sea battle concept was published in an abridged and declassified version. Both concepts aim at devising measures by which the vulnerability of fixed US installations in the region and of US warships (in particular aircraft carriers) can be reduced. They also propose more effective measures to integrate the efforts of all services within all relevant domains (land, sea, air, cyber, outer space, intelligence and information).

Critics have pointed out, however, that most of these measures do not promise a real fix to the challenges posed by a Chinese ASCEL strategy and might support the perception that the United States is embarking on a full-fledged containment policy against China. This might intensify the sense of insecurity in China and could add a military dimension to the latent conflict between the United States and China with lasting negative effects.<sup>94</sup>

Meanwhile, some are making proposals of a broader strategic nature. One group of scholars is arguing for a US retreat from Asia: for a US shift from a strategy of engagement to one of offshore balancing.<sup>95</sup> However, such a retreat might not solve the problems the United States wants to fix in the region. Retrenchment, as one author has put it, ‘could leave the United States in an even worse position, especially if this approach meant withdrawing its forces from their overseas outposts without considering how to reintroduce them’.<sup>96</sup>

Others point to the complicated nature of US–Chinese relations and the almost insoluble dilemmas associated with any containment policies. As one author has put it, the US is faced with a complex conundrum:

It is tied to China through dense economic links that have value because of their absolute gains, but it is threatened by the fact that the relative gains from this relationship are arguably greater for Beijing and are increasingly used to build up Chinese military forces in a way that threatens the security of the United States and its closest Asian allies. This

<sup>93</sup> See Cliff et al., *Entering the dragon's lair*, pp. 95–103.

<sup>94</sup> See Ely Ratner, ‘Rebalancing to Asia with an insecure China’, *Washington Quarterly* 36: 2, Spring 2013, pp. 21–38.

<sup>95</sup> Barry R. Posen, ‘Pull back: the case for a less activist foreign policy’, *Foreign Affairs* 92: 1, Jan.–Feb. 2013, pp. 116–28; Stephen M. Walt, ‘The end of the American era’, *The National Interest*, no. 116, Nov.–Dec. 2011, pp. 6–16; Christopher Layne, ‘Offshore balancing revisited’, *Washington Quarterly* 25: 2, Spring 2002, pp. 233–48.

<sup>96</sup> Montgomery, ‘Contested primacy in the western Pacific’, p. 148.

problem has no easy solutions. What alone is certain is that containment is infeasible today, even if it may be most needed as a device for limiting Chinese power.<sup>97</sup>

As a consequence, novel forms of diplomacy and bilateral understanding are called for, such as mutual understandings regarding naval operations in the contested maritime areas, or a strategic dialogue to identify what both sides consider their essential interests in the region and where they might cooperate (for instance, in securing sea lines that are essential for trade).<sup>98</sup>

This debate is open, and its outcome is hard to predict. It demonstrates that today's military competition between the United States (and maybe Japan) and China in East Asia is driven by many factors and is increasingly seen as a highly dynamic process with the potential for escalation that could have repercussions within the whole region and even far beyond, but without automatically leading into a new world war. Structural similarities with the situation in Europe before 1914 are hard to find. In order to assess those elements in the 1914 situation that are relevant to the present, however, it will be useful to look at the state of the art in terms of military technology and to pay special attention to chains of action and reaction that are facilitated by modern technological developments under specific geographical and political circumstances.

### *The role of international institutions*

International norms and institutions constraining the use of force in international relations were extremely weak in the time leading up to the First World War. International institutions—such as the United Nations—might have changed the nature of diplomacy and might have prevented the 'doomsday machine diplomacy' from unfolding.<sup>99</sup> The East Asia of today is not an area where international institutions are very strong; but unlike Europe before 1914, it can at least boast a couple of regional and transregional efforts to mediate in the maritime territorial disputes. In particular, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been quite busy for 30 years in trying to tie China into multilateral forums within which maritime and security issues can be discussed. These endeavours have not been very successful. In part, this is because Beijing has rejected any multilateral solutions to problems in its neighbourhood; in part, it is because of the lack of unity among the various member states of ASEAN, which have maritime disputes among themselves. The only successes so far have been the agreement leading to the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea involving the ASEAN states and China (4 November 2002) and an additional paper from July 2011 specifying some of the provisions of that

<sup>97</sup> Ashley Tellis, 'Balancing without containment: a US strategy for confronting China's rise', *Washington Quarterly* 36: 4, Fall 2013, pp. 109–24 at p. 111.

<sup>98</sup> James Manicom, 'China and American seapower in East Asia: is accommodation possible?', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37: 3, 2014, pp. 345–71; Allesio Patalano and James Manicom, 'Rising tides: seapower and regional security in northeast Asia', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37: 3, 2014, pp. 335–44 at p. 343.

<sup>99</sup> Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, ch. 7.

2002 document.<sup>100</sup> These agreements, however, have not brought about any real easing of tension. Earlier hopes that Japan and China might find a common basis for regime building in the East China Sea have turned out to be premature.<sup>101</sup>

## Conclusion

Trying to assess the probability of a major war in East Asia through the lens of past European experiences is certainly an interesting exercise, but not one that should be expected to provide politicians, scholars and observers with a golden key to understand what is going on in that region today. Nevertheless there is, as this article has tried to demonstrate, some virtue in looking for structural analogies between Europe in 1914 and East Asia in 2014. Both regions had experienced some decades of peace and economic prosperity, made possible through economic globalization. It is hence a worthwhile endeavour to question why Europe went into the abyss and what can be concluded from that experience that may have relevance to East Asia today. In searching for structural analogies, the theoretical debate in International Relations is of only limited value. Neither the (structural realist) theory of Thucydides' trap nor theories of institutionalist, liberal or constructivist origin can provide us with more than just basic ideas on how to understand international relations. They do not give us tools with which we can make any deeper assessment of the danger of a major war breaking out in East Asia.

In seeking to identify conclusions which might point to such structural analogies, at least four lessons are apparent.

(1) The nature of the international system (both global and regional) is crucial. It is of decisive importance whether or not the international system is characterized by outright anarchy (and self-help) or by a more or less developed and institutionalized understanding among the main actors about the way to preserve peace and how to organize economic exchange. The situation before the First World War was one in which a quite successful liberal international economic order (initiated by Britain) had set free economic dynamics and forces which created fundamental shifts in the military correlation of forces. These shifts eventually contributed to the destruction of the international security order. There are some similarities between this situation and that of East Asia today. Again, we have an international liberal economic order which has set free economic dynamics (mainly the economic rise of China, but that of other countries as well) that are translating into fundamental changes in the field of armed force. The strategic balance in East Asia is being radically redrawn with the growing assertiveness of China and the relative decline of the United States. Unlike Europe at the turn of the nineteenth

<sup>100</sup> The 2002 Declaration on the Conduct can be found on the ASEAN website: <http://www.asean.org/asean/external-relations/china/item/declaration-on-the-conduct-of-parties-in-the-south-china-sea>, accessed 30 Sept. 2014. As to the latest document, see 'RPT—China, ASEAN set "guidelines" on sea row, but no deal expected', *Reuters News Agency*, 20 July 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/07/20/asean-southchina-sea-idUSL3E7IKoM620110720>, accessed 30 Sept. 2014.

<sup>101</sup> Mark J. Valencia and Yoshihisa Amai, 'Regime building in the East China Sea', *Ocean Development and International Law* 34: 2, 2003, pp. 189–208.

and twentieth centuries, the existing security order in East Asia is not yet characterized by outright anarchy; however, the existing institutions are weak and the influence of the United States as an external pacifier is, relatively speaking, in decline because of the growing shadow of China's military buildup. The regional institutions will remain weak because of the lack of unanimity among the smaller and medium-sized powers, and because of their insistence on the recognition of their sovereignty. It is hardly likely that China will take over the role of an external pacifier—at least not in the role of a benign hegemon, that is, one that is accepted. Hence, this international regional system entails a number of uncertainties and is fraught with the danger that armed conflicts could emerge over territorial disputes and other problems. However, knowing that the international system in East Asia is fraught with uncertainties does not in itself provide us with an instrument to predict the probability of a major war.

(2) Domestic factors played an important role in Europe, not only in bringing about the First World War but also in setting in motion the deadly dynamics that made it impossible to end for so long. The First World War does not lend itself as evidence for the theory of democratic peace, a theory that holds that democracies do not fight wars against each other (unless one clings to the old propagandist formula according to which Britain, France and Russia were fully fledged democracies in 1914, while Germany was not). The reality was significantly more differentiated. In all capitals (except St Petersburg) there were strong parliamentary hurdles to overcome—most notably in Berlin, since the Kaiser could not go to war without the permission of the parliament, which was dominated by political parties more or less opposed to him. The First World War demonstrated, in fact, how easily domestic institutional obstacles to war can be overcome by nationalist feelings. It also showed how public opinion and nationalist feelings can make the termination of war almost impossible. In East Asia, the situation today has some similarities to that of Europe 100 years ago, but with qualifications. In today's East Asia there are a lot of nationalist feelings, which might cause a minor military incident to develop into a major military confrontation. However, since the geography of Asia is considerably different from that of Europe, it is hard to infer that such an escalation would end in a major war comparable to that which began in 1914.

(3) Neither the absence of a stable international order nor the existence of strong nationalist feelings can on its own explain the escalation of limited conflict into major war. What is also needed is at least one actor who is isolated and who feels that the tide of history is flowing against him. Such an actor might be ready to take existential risks if international isolation translates into palpable strategic vulnerability. This was the situation of Germany in 1914; in today's East Asia, only North Korea has the potential to fill that role.

(4) One has also to take into account military-technological developments and their interaction within a broader strategic framework. In this area, the Korean peninsula should certainly come under close scrutiny, but even greater risks attach to the emerging military competition between the United States and China over

the control of the South China Sea and the East China Sea and beyond. The current Chinese buildup of A2/AD capabilities might eventually lead the Chinese leadership to seriously consider the elimination of the US military presence in the region adjacent to China by a surprise attack that combines kinetic warfare, information warfare and cyber warfare. It is hardly likely that China is envisaging this 'Pearl Harbor' option today, but the military preparations of the PLA are more or less proceeding in this direction. Most likely, the political intention behind this armament effort is to signal to neighbouring states that there is no point in their forming military alliances with the United States, and to signal to the United States that Washington cannot have good relations with Beijing, on the one hand, and form alliances in the region, on the other. But one cannot exclude the possibility that the Chinese leadership, at a later moment, may choose to demonstrate, once and for all, who is actually the strong man in East Asia. Again, as in the First World War, the state of the art in the field of military technology, in combination with geography and likely chains of action and reaction, could provide incentives for a first strike. At least, in contrast to the situation before 1914, in which most actors behaved like sleepwalkers, there is today an awareness of these risks and issues, both in the United States and in some Asian capitals.

