



Washington Should Remember the Past and Avoid a World War I Redux

Doug Bandow

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Attempting to apply historical lessons to current events typically is problematic. Circumstances change dramatically; almost any moment in time in 1914 looks radically different from any one in 2020. The rise of a dictator and onset of a war may be examples of dangerous trends to be avoided, but rarely are similar enough to current events to predict a repeat performance.

Yet the onset of World War I begs for serious remembrance and even more assiduous avoidance. The conflict was a dramatic historical hinge point which radically transformed the world and set the stage for another, even worse global conflagration a generation later, followed by decades more chaos and conflict. A century has passed and we are still not free of the consequences of what was originally known as the Great War.

That conflict offers important cautions to a world characterized by shifting power dynamics and leavened by health pandemic, economic depression, and military confrontation. Circumstances have created unusual potential for great harm. If enough of the right events go badly wrong – unlikely, but hardly impossible when people and systems are under great and rising pressure – the result could be systemic and cascading disaster.

Consider the world as the 19th century passed into the 20th. The United Kingdom remained the most important global power, with vast international reach but not as strong or dominant as the U.S. today. Both America and Germany were rising, determined to assert themselves on the world stage.

Washington remained mostly distant from European affairs, though it was quite active militarily in Latin America. The US took the Monroe Doctrine seriously, ever prepared to intimidate, attack, and even occupy its southern neighbors – America's liberal tradition evidently did not apply to foreigners. The newly elected president, Woodrow Wilson, exhibited a combustible mix of hubris, hypocrisy, sanctimony, and ambition, and used US power to impose his personal will on what he saw as the corrupt old world.

Washington and John Bull long had been at odds, almost coming to blows during the Civil War. However, London gave up attempting to counter America, which was simply dropped from the UK's traditional naval standard, which required matching the next two navies combined. Accommodating the Yanks was considered unfortunate but necessary, the only realistic course.

The German Empire, headed by Kaiser Wilhelm, whose mercurial, flamboyant temperament bore an uncanny resemblance to that of Donald Trump, was a more straightforward traditional power and rival of the UK. Berlin possessed the European continent's finest army and then sought to create a globe-spanning navy, triggering an arms race with the British. Germany feared encirclement in Europe while seeking colonies abroad. It was allied with deteriorating Austria-Hungary and unreliable Italy while facing established France and rising Russia. An attempt by Berlin and London to reach an accommodation failed.

The Balkans was a complicated geopolitical tinderbox. Dismissed as unworthy of the bones of a single Pomeranian Grenadier by Germany's famed Iron Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, the region was bitterly contested by Vienna and the Russian Empire, as well as the rapidly declining Ottoman Empire. Dedicated to the destruction of Habsburg-ruled Austria-Hungary, which occupied Bosnia, was the small state of Serbia, in which the previous king and queen, friendly toward Vienna, had been gruesomely murdered by Serb nationalists. Determined to create a greater Slav state, the new Belgrade regime enthusiastically employed terrorism.

Moreover, broader forces and movements cast shadows across what superficially appeared to be a rising triumph of liberalism. The UK fiercely battled German commercial competition while the Royal Navy outbuilt Berlin to dominate the oceans. German officials felt encircled, tied to enfeebled Austria-Hungary and challenged by rapidly industrializing Russia. Contending statesmen believed conflict was inevitable at some point, encouraging some to believe that sooner would be better.

Nevertheless, as the summer of 1914 arrived few imagined that the continent would soon be at war. The major powers in Europe were growing more closely connected economically. Prosperity was rising across the continent. The Austro-Hungarian, German, and Russian empires demonstrated liberalizing tendencies. The German franchise was broader than that in the UK and the Social Democratic Party enjoyed significant influence in the Reichstag. In the view of some intellectuals, war was simply impossible, too costly to mount in the modern capitalist world.

Then on June 28 came the assassination in Sarajevo, Bosnia, of the Habsburg heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne by a Serbian terrorist armed by Belgrade. A month later troops were marching and artillery was firing. By the end of the war on November 11, 1918, 20 million people were dead, multiple nations were ravaged, several empires had been swept away, and the trio of totalitarian viruses, communism, fascism, and Nazism, had been loosed.

On September 1, 1939, in a world filled with unsettled disputes and feuds, World War II opened. Conflict spread over the entire globe and helped communism triumph in the world's most populous state, China. When the second great global maelstrom finally concluded in September 1945, the accumulated horror was beyond imagination.

Thankfully, today's world looks very different than that of 1914. However, it would be myopic to presume that there is little risk of war. True, conflict seems unlikely, even foolhardy, with countries laid prone by the pandemic. Yet rational decision-making is not a mark of the times, and certainly not in the most powerful state. Geopolitical mines abound, ready to explode when an unwary or, more likely, blind statesman makes a careless or maladroit misstep.

First, global power is shifting. The Thucydides Trap, going back to Thucydides' celebrated history of the Peloponnesian War, is constantly cited to explain the tension between the US and

the People's Republic of China, in the respective roles of existing and rising powers. Today's dynamic also highlights London's hostile response to Germany's growing ambitions. Washington's seeming refusal to take seriously Beijing's ambitions and consider possibilities for accommodation creates at least one danger sign. China, whether communist or democratic, is unlikely abandon its determination to reclaim influence lost during the "century of humiliation" when Western powers occupied and despoiled the Chinese Empire.

Second, the US is entangled in multiple alliances. Its partners are uniformly dependent, largely unwilling to take their own protection seriously. Yet they assume Washington will forever back them. The equivalent of military hardliners who filled defense ministries across Europe in 1914 dominate US policy and push for ever more dangerous security ties – proposing to defend Georgia and Ukraine, embroiled in conflict with Russia, and Taiwan, claimed by the PRC.

Although alliances are meant to deter, they also ensnare great powers and encourage weak states to act irresponsibly. In July 1914 the continent of Europe plunged into war after a Serbian terrorist killed an Austro-Hungarian royal, something originally seen as of no serious concern to the vast majority of British, Germans, French, Russians, Italians, Ottomans, Romanians, Bulgarians, and ultimately Americans.

Today an edgy Japanese sea captain confronting Chinese vessels near the contested Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands or angry Filipino captain sparring with Chinese ships near disputed Scarborough Shoal could light a fuse to war just as Serbia's Gavrilo Princip did by shooting Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Aggressive air and naval patrols between Russia and NATO, potential allied and Russian intervention in the Belarus crisis, and an upsurge of fighting in Ukraine's Donbass could trigger a combative spiral leading to an unwanted and unanticipated military confrontation. The usual firebreaks to war might prove less effective since Washington policymakers increasingly believe that conflict between the US and PRC is likely and Moscow poses a chronic threat.

Third, commerce appears to have become as much cause of as solution to political conflict. Beijing now is at the center of charges that it created the coronavirus and bungled the response, demands that Beijing pay damages to the innocent, and proposals to "decouple" China and other economies by dismantling supply chains. Earlier complaints involved everything from unfair commercial treatment to IP theft to coerced technology transfer. Such issues aren't likely to cause war on their own, but they are poisoning relationships and creating new grievances.

Fourth, the US has turned the Mideast and nearby Central Asia into an arena of conflict rather like the Balkans before World War I. For instance, Washington is backing Saudi Arabia's unprovoked, murderous aggression against Yemen to restore a puppet ruler to power. By giving Iran an opportunity to intervene and bleed the ineffective Saudi military, Riyadh turned a local conflict into an international sectarian war.

Using immiserating sanctions and aggressive military action, such as killing Qasem Soleimani, head of the Quds Forces, in January, Washington also is pushing Iran toward war. In what has become another front Washington insists on maintaining forces in Iraq, where Iranian-backed militias continue to shoot rockets at US facilities and otherwise target US troops. Some observers suspect that Trump administration members, if not Trump, hope to trigger a military response to justify full-scale war with Tehran.

Similarly, Washington is impoverishing the already war-ravaged Syrian people through sanctions, claiming that such pressure will force regime change, as if President Bashar al-Assad, having survived nearly a decade of civil war, will yield power to spare his population economic hardship. The US also is illegally occupying Syrian territory, promoting creation of a separate ethnic Kurdish state under attack by Turkey, and seizing Syrian oil fields, where US forces have come into conflict with Russian troops – there at the invitation of the legitimate government. Having illegally invaded and committed flagrant acts of war American forces are legitimate military targets of the Syrian army backed by Moscow. Separately, Turkey has threatened to attack US units located in Kurdish areas Turkey sought to occupy.

In Ukraine the US is providing lethal aid, including Javelin anti-tank missiles, whose sole purpose is to kill Russian soldiers and irregular ethnic Russian fighters in the Donbass. In Afghanistan American forces remain after nearly 20 years amid claims that both Moscow and Tehran are paying bounties for the killing of US personnel. Although the charges are unsubstantiated, support for the Taliban would be logical retaliation for American attacks on Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and US military support for Ukrainian forces.

Washington's global intervention in other nations' conflicts creates manifold opportunities for retaliation and could suck in major powers. No American should be surprised if someday Yemeni terrorists strike back at the US, now complicit in the Saudi royals' many war crimes. Iran would be a much tougher opponent than Iraq, with the ability to do significant damage throughout the Middle East. Turkey is a NATO ally armed by America. And Russia is a nuclear power with robust conventional capabilities and determined to prevent domination by Washington.

Fifth, American leadership is atrocious: reckless, ignorant, careless, militaristic, myopic, arrogant. This bipartisan elite has kept America at war year in and year out, killed thousands of Americans and hundreds of thousands of foreigners, displaced millions of civilians, wasted trillions of dollars, ravaged multiple nations, funded, armed, and otherwise aided anti-American terrorists, and impoverished innocent peoples in an attempt to maintain US primacy. As a result, the world is less stable and America is less secure.

Although Trump's failures are many and obvious, Democrats are even worse in many ways. They are equally determined to dominate the globe, more committed to every alliance, potential alliance, and possible alliance, also willing to commit murder and mayhem in other nations with minimal cause, and utterly unconcerned about the cost of endless war in lives, wealth, and values. All the while they are even more prone to moralizing hypocrisy and sanctimony.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the practical policies that characterize Democratic and Republican rule are similar. For different reasons neoconservative hawks and liberal internationalists are equally determined to treat Russia as the Soviet Union reborn and refuse to engage with North Korea. The two groups appear equally ready to starve the Syrian people in the name of helping the Syrian people. Left and Right are equally horrified at the president's suggestion that Americans need not forever subsidize the defense of Asia and Europe. In an international crisis like that which overwhelmed Europe in summer 1914 America's bipartisan policymaking elite likely would fail as badly or even worse than did statesmen a century ago.

Given the horrors of World War I, one can only hope and pray that the world never again suffers a conflict comparable in direct costs and ultimate impacts. To the good, today's world is very

different than a century ago, and historical comparisons remain dubious at best. Nevertheless, many factors which contributed to the eruption of the Great War in summer 1914 are present today. Although war is neither certain nor likely, conflicts have started over less throughout history.

Instead of constantly doubling down, reinforcing the very strategies that look most responsible for earlier international explosions, policymakers should dismantle potential transmission belts of war. If we wait until after the next trigger for combat has been pulled, it could be too late. Then, just like after World War I, we would spend years, decades, or more paying for our foolishness.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.