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THE GREAT WAR

1914

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PIE

AND THE WORLD  
OF TOMORROW

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## Will Europe's Past be East Asia's Future?

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There are some disturbing similarities between present-day Asia and pre-1914 Europe. China demands a role that is commensurate with its ambitions, just like Germany at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Neither Great Britain nor the dominant power, the United States, knew how to curb the expansion of the emerging power a century ago. Given the exacerbation of nationalist sentiment in Asia, lessons from the First World War must be remembered in order to avoid a dangerous escalation.

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The 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a convergence of socio-economic lifestyles in the world through globalization. Paradoxically, however, we are witnessing a wide gap in the pattern of international relations between different geographical regions. For instance, East Asia's international relations at present are more akin to the turbulent balance of power politics in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe than to today's stable Europe.

In East Asia, nationalism is rising and territorial disputes are worsening among countries. Top political leaders tend to distrust their neighboring counterparts and are suspicious of each other's intentions. More often than not, they tend to use the nationalist sentiments of their people for their own advantage in domestic politics, rather than soothing those emotions through exercising genuine political leadership. In addition, Japan has not been as politically competent as Germany was in admitting responsibility and clearing the historical legacies of atrocities. Bitter memories are still alive in the minds of Asians, and are making international relations in the region more complicated.

Deepening economic interdependence in recent decades between China, South Korea, Japan and ASEAN countries does not seem to contribute much to stabilizing their own political relationships either. This tumultuous



situation in East Asia has begun to raise fears about the possibility of escalating crises among countries in the region. Would it be going too far to recall the sobering fact that World War I broke out despite Norman Angell's rosy expectations of peace through economic interdependence, expressed in his book *Europe's Optical Illusion* just five years earlier?

Moreover, in contrast to Europe, which has the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and NATO, Asia has no effective institutional mechanism that would provide member states with principles, rules, norms and decision-making procedures to guide state behavior toward security cooperation. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the only mechanism for security cooperation in the region, is too loose to influence the foreign policy behavior of member states in an effective way.

As of today, there are increasing tensions between China and Japan over a few islets in the East China Sea. A tug of war over the South China Sea is going on between China and a few ASEAN countries, with the United States behind them. As soon as the Chinese Ministry of National Defense unilaterally declared its East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone on 23 November 2013, the United States sent two B-52 bombers in an attempt to challenge China's claim. Against this backdrop, there is no institution or forum for discussing these matters seriously. After all, states in East Asia totally depend on anachronistic power politics – as did the European states a century ago.

### **Power shifts and the accompanying political risks**

If East Asian states keep depending on power politics as a *modus vivendi* of international relations, we need to think seriously about historical experiences in order to avoid past mistakes. It is also important to study carefully how the logic of power operated in the past and try to draw some implications for the current situation.

Scholars of international relations have noted how the relative power of a major state tends to rise and decline. The history of the modern state system since the early 16<sup>th</sup> century can be described as a repeating cycle of the rise and fall of major states' relative power in European and global politics. For instance, Portugal was the dominant power from the late 15<sup>th</sup> to mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, Spain from the early 16<sup>th</sup> to early 17<sup>th</sup>, the Netherlands during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, France from the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> to the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup>, Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and finally the United States from the end of World War II until recently.

From the perspective of the cycle of power, one important similarity between Europe in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> is the shift in power. After its unification in 1871, Germany's relative power rose rapidly while that of Britain declined. This power shift was the most important underlying structural factor that affected European politics up to the outbreak of World War I in 1914.

Similarly, though the United States is still the predominant military power, its economic power has been declining. Especially after the financial crisis of 2008, the US became the biggest debtor country in the world. Japan has experienced two decades of economic stagnation since the 1990s, and fell behind China in terms of GDP size in 2010. In contrast, the relative economic power of China has been rising due to rapid economic growth for the last three decades since Deng Xiaoping's opening-up of the Chinese economy in 1978.

One important issue here is what kind of relationship exists between the cycle of power and the stability of international relations. According to Professor Charles Doran of Johns Hopkins University, political leaders of states passing critical points in the cycle of relative power tend to witness sudden and unexpected shifts in the trend of relative power. Facing such uncertainties, they tend to be subject to misinterpretation, miscalculation, and even overreaction to rival states' actions, which may lead to serious foreign policy mistakes.

As the trend of relative power of major countries keeps changing, a gap appears between the power and the role of major states in international relations. Top political leaders of the rising countries feel that it is unfair to be treated in the same way as before the rise of their relative power. Because of this, they tend to raise their voice and demand a greater role in international politics. However, the political leaders of the established power tend to be reluctant to accept these demands as it might mean weakening of their own country's influence and role in international relations. In addition, political inertia inside the established power may favor retaining the *status quo*.

The key issue in such critical power shifts, then, is how to readjust international roles so that they better fit the new distribution of power. Inadequate management of international relations between a rising power and the established power at a critical juncture has often led to major wars. In particular, leaders of rising states tend to be prematurely over-confident, and may thus provoke nervousness among neighboring countries,

making international relations in the region unstable. World War I can be seen as the result of mismanagement of international relations in the critical period of shifts in power during the two decades leading up to 1914.

### **European experience in the late 19th century**

Otto von Bismarck, who accomplished the goal of German unification, was a prudent political leader. He did not want to frighten Germany's neighbors and tried hard to soothe their concerns over the rising power of Germany after unification. Thus he carefully crafted an alliance network composed of the League of the Three Emperors of 1873 and 1881 (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia), the Triple Alliance of 1882 (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy), and the Mediterranean Agreements of 1887 (Austria-Hungary, Italy, and Britain). In this way, Bismarck could isolate France and prevent neighboring states from forming a coalition and encircling the rising Germany.

However, European international relations began to deteriorate gravely after the inauguration of the new Kaiser, Wilhelm II. He was an intimidating leader who believed that Britain would be bullied into becoming Germany's ally. Instead of relieving the anxieties of neighbors over the rising power of Germany, he actually wanted them to unambiguously acknowledge Germany's new power status. The first thing he did after attaining power was to dismiss Bismarck as chancellor in 1890. Then he began to destroy Bismarck's alliance network. For instance, he declined Russia's request to renew the Reinsurance Treaty of 1887, which worsened Russo-German relationships irrevocably. This made Russia search for an ally in France, leading to the Franco-Russian Alliance of 1892, a decisive diplomatic event that helped to lead to World War I. The worsening relationship between Russia and Germany, on the other hand, gave Austria a diplomatic *carte blanche*, emboldening it to pressure Serbia after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in June 1914. Consequently, Kaiser Wilhelm's rough diplomacy frightened France, Russia and Britain, long-time rivals in European politics, and made them unite with each other against Germany. European politics then began to be polarized into two blocs, and the rise in tensions between these blocs culminated in the outbreak of World War I.

### **China's assertive diplomacy since 2010**

If the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 elevated the international status of the United States to the position of the only superpower in the world, then the financial crisis of 2008 demoted the US from its predominant leadership position to one of four or five major powers in an increasingly multipolar world. Though still the predominant military superpower, the

United States has become more and more reluctant to intervene in internationally problematic areas since 2008 – as shown by the US government's hesitant attitude in dealing with the revolt in Libya or the humanitarian disaster in Syria.

On the other hand, the leaders of the rising power, China, seem to have interpreted the US-led financial crisis as a decisive event that will irreversibly weaken the global political leadership of the United States. This may have encouraged the Chinese leaders to be more assertive in Chinese diplomacy since late 2009. Some scholars had been arguing even before the 2008 crisis that a rising China would challenge the United States. For example, China led the BASIC states (Brazil, South Africa, India and China) in refusing binding limitations on greenhouse-gas emissions demanded by the United States and others in the Copenhagen Climate Change negotiations in late 2009. China's protest against US arms sales to Taiwan in 2010 was unprecedentedly strong. The Chinese government even declared it would sanction those companies involved in the arms sales to Taiwan. China also took a strong position on the value of the yuan when the US government pressed it to revalue the currency. Its way of handling the issue of releasing the captain of a Chinese fishing boat arrested by the Japanese Coast Guard in 2010 near the Senkaku Islands (Diaoyu Dao in Chinese) was undiplomatic. And China also claimed sovereignty over the South China Sea in a more resolute tone than previously, which led to heightened tensions with Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines, as well as the United States.

Amid the rising concerns of neighboring states about China's newly assertive behavior, State Councilor Dai Bingguo announced in late 2010 that China would keep on pursuing the strategy of peaceful development. However, observers of China's diplomacy are wondering whether this doctrine is fully shared by everyone in the Chinese leadership. In particular, Chinese military leaders do not seem to be fully committed to this strategy. For example, in February 2012, then Vice-President Xi Jinping said (in an interview with the *Washington Post*) that the Pacific was wide enough to embrace both the United States and China. This remark was interpreted by many as revealing China's intention to challenge the supremacy in the Pacific that the United States has been enjoying since the end of World War II and turn the Pacific into a common sphere of influence for both the United States and China.

After his inauguration as President in early 2013, President Xi Jinping called for a new type of relationship between major countries. This was interpreted by specialists as China's intention to maintain cooperative

relations with the United States instead of challenging it. However, China declared its own Air Defense Identification Zone in late November 2013 without consulting its neighboring countries. This increased tensions in China's relations with Japan, the United States and South Korea. This assertive diplomacy of China raised anxiety among neighboring countries about the rise of China's power and its future impact on their security. The US government declared the policy of 'Pivot to Asia' (or 'Rebalancing') and strengthened its security commitment to Asia. It also began to tighten its relationships with allies such as Japan, Australia and South Korea, and Southeast Asian countries in general. Japan's new Prime Minister Abe Shinjo began to redirect Japan's diplomatic and security policies in a more nationalist direction. Japan tightened its relationship with the United States, Australia and a few other Southeast Asian countries, including the Philippines, which have been involved in serious conflict with China over the South China Sea. Prime Minister Abe has been trying to recover Japan's right of collective defense and reinterpret Japan's constitution in order to remove obstacles against the exercise of military force. An editorial of a major Western newspaper expressed concern that Prime Minister Abe was seeking to revive Japanese imperialism, and link to Japan's pre-1945 militaristic past. Southeast Asian countries also, in fear of China's new assertiveness, especially on the issue of South China Sea, have been requesting continued US commitment in the region.

### **Similarities between 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe and 21<sup>st</sup> century Asia**

Despite many differences, the political situation in Europe in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and that in East Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century share some important similarities.

First, just like Germany after the 1890s, China since 2010 has been demanding a more important role in international relations. And, like the UK, the major power in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the United States does not have a clear strategy on how to handle the challenges from the rising power. British political leaders in the 19<sup>th</sup> century did not have any other proactive option for peace than sticking to the diplomatic tradition of 'splendid isolation' and declining Germany's request for an alliance. Similarly, US political leaders such as President Barack Obama do not seem to have any strategic vision for establishing a stable and cooperative relationship with China. Therefore, we cannot exclude the possibility of a global leadership vacuum and repetition of the past mistakes of European leaders that led to the disastrous situation in 1914. It may be difficult to imagine that a major war on the scale of World War I or II might occur in this nuclear age. Thousands of nuclear warheads have actually helped humankind to



maintain peace on the basis of a balance of terror since the Cold War years. However, if a chaotic situation arose as the result of critical mistakes by policy-makers, this might cost the world as much as did the wars of the last century, but in a different and more complicated form.

Secondly, as in Europe after the 1890s, the current rising power in East Asia does not seem to care much about neighboring countries' fears. Although, as in Europe in the 1890s, there is clearly a security dilemma in current East Asian politics, no leaders seem to be interested in trying to mitigate this with a vision for international peace. Instead, their eyes seem to be narrowly fixated on the pursuit of their own national interest. Just as Kaiser Wilhelm II was insensitive to the fears of France and Russia, Chinese leaders do not seem to care much about neighboring countries' fears concerning China's rapid rise. China certainly initiated a new diplomacy after 1996 when its threat against Taiwan caused confrontation with the United States, and worries about the threat posed by China increased. It has been trying to engage with its neighbors and was effective in stabilizing relations with them. This was so especially when President George W Bush was implementing a high-profile, muscular diplomacy in the Middle East and could not pay much attention to Asia. Thus, China could quietly expand its influence to a significant extent in Asia. However, its assertive diplomacy since 2009 has more than undermined what it achieved through smile diplomacy.

Some China specialists have pointed out that the reason for China's recent assertiveness might be due to its leaders' inability to firmly control the decision-making process in the security field. The increasingly complicated nature of conflicting interests among bureaucratic organizations and interest groups as a result of rapid economic growth has made it much more difficult for the top leaders to coordinate and control the security policy-making process. If this is the case, it may make major-power relationships even more unstable and subject to policy-makers' misunderstanding, mistakes and overreactions. Though different in nature, this may be as dangerous as the 19<sup>th</sup> century 'military doomsday machine' of automatic chain reaction that seriously constrained political leaders' decision-making capability in relation to war.

Thirdly, leaders are subject to misjudgments in policy-making during unstable international relations. In the early 1900s, Kaiser Wilhelm mistakenly believed that he would be able to threaten Britain into concluding a bilateral alliance with Germany by expanding German naval power. Instead, Britain interpreted Germany's attempt as a serious challenge to British hegemony and responded by agreeing the Anglo-Russian Entente

in 1907. Similarly, President Xi Jinping may be trying to upset the military *status quo* in the Western Pacific, and East and South China Sea, believing that the United States will be unwilling and unable to respond strongly. Although we have yet to see the US response, it is not likely that the United States would tolerate the Chinese challenge, considering the huge gap in military capabilities between the two countries.

Finally, dealing with Japan's foreign-policy behavior will remain as difficult and important as Germany's dealing with Austria was a century ago. If the United States were to worsen its relationship with China irreversibly in the future, it would be difficult for it to restrain Japanese behavior. The United States may become a hostage of Japanese policy toward China, in which case international relations would unfold even more uncontrollably and dangerously. Thus, it will be crucial for the United States to continue to engage China. Also it will need to ease Japan's anxiety about its security, while inducing Japanese leaders to behave discreetly and refrain from overly nationalistic actions.

### **What should be done?**

As international experience of pre-World War I diplomacy has shown, balance of power politics is too precarious to be relied on as a way of achieving international peace. Perhaps only a political genius with a strategic vision, like Metternich after the Napoleonic War or Bismarck after German unification, would be able to build a new international security framework that would stabilize international relations in this critical period of global power shifts. However, this does not relieve us of our duty to search for a *modus vivendi* for stable international relations in the coming years. Striking a grand compromise between the United States, the established power, and China, the rising power, would be an ideal solution. It might not be easy to strike a grand bargain between the two, but it would be the required starting-point to stabilize international relations in the region.

The key for such a compromise would be for the United States to recognize the rise of Chinese economic power, and make concerted efforts to reflect its rise by strengthening the role of China in global economic institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, WTO, etc. The Chinese government and opinion leaders have been complaining that their voice has been underrepresented in the global economic institutions. The United States would also have to set a long-term goal of admitting China into the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement. Separation of the Asia-Pacific economy into two blocs, one centered on the US and the other on China, would not contribute to the interests of either country, nor to global prosperity.

Moreover, a comprehensive economic partnership between the two big powers, as suggested by former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, might also be a reasonable idea to pursue.

China, in turn, should respect and protect the prevailing set of international principles, rules and institutions instead of trying to challenge them and create alternative mechanisms under its own influence. Although it did not participate in the process of creating the current international principles and institutions, its active participation in those institutions enabled its rapid economic growth in the last three decades. Its continued commitment to those institutions would benefit its own national interest in the future too. It would be prudent for Chinese decision-makers to address the fact that the United States still maintains substantial military advantage over China. Considering the huge domestic challenges that the Chinese leaders are facing, it is against China's own national interest to challenge the military *status quo* prematurely. This is why China had better respect the *status quo* in the security field, especially in terms of the East and South China Seas. Deng Xiaoping's axiom "Hide your strength and bide your time" and the strategy of 'peaceful development' will continue to be important for China for some time into the future.

The United States, in turn, needs to reduce the volume of arms sales to Taiwan. China-Taiwan relations have improved in the past decade. Owing to this currently favorable cross-straits relationship, the US would be able to maintain the goal of assuring Taiwan's security even with reduced arms sales. Since the Taiwan issue has long been the most important concern for China, this kind of US initiative would contribute much to confidence-building and the stabilization of US-China relations. The important issue here may be how US decision-makers could persuade those who view Taiwan through the prism of confrontation with China. Again, the grand compromise between the United States and China should not be regarded as the endpoint but as a starting-point for wider cooperation and compromise among states in East Asia.

However, ensuring peace through compromise among major powers may turn out to be difficult. Thus, there should be simultaneous efforts taken to establish a new institutional mechanism for security cooperation in East Asia. From the theoretical perspective of international relations, the former recommendation – the idea of a grand compromise – would come from the realist camp; the latter – the idea of institution-building – would likely come from the liberalist camp. There is no reason not to pursue both recommendations at the same time.

Although it may sound unrealistic, let's suppose that an institutional mechanism such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) had been established in the pre-World War I period, whereby the leaders of major European powers could gather together and talk about pending security issues at every important moment. If there had been, history might well have been rewritten. After World War II, the United States, the main architect of international order, established a multi-lateral security framework in Europe. However, in Asia it built a hub-and-spoke security model based on US-centered bilateral alliances. Although this model worked smoothly in the age of Cold War confrontation, it has been inadequate for the post-Cold War international situation since the 1990s. For instance, since the communist threat disappeared, regional dynamics in Asia have become much more pluralistic and complicated. The links of cooperation among countries of liberal democracy began to weaken. Consequently, the missing links and the lack of channels for cooperation among allies of the United States have become conspicuous. For example, two US allies, Korea and Japan, did not have any institutional channel through which they could deal with bilateral disputes.

The leaders of major powers in the region have certainly been expressing interest in establishing a multilateral security cooperative mechanism in East Asia. However, these expressions have amounted to mere political rhetoric, rather than indicating any serious intention to invest political capital in building an OSCE or other types of institution. Political leaders in the region may have been thinking deep in their minds that their countries are too big or too important to be constrained by any kind of international principle or institutions in the security field. Compared to Europe, the temptation of power politics may still be relatively powerful in East Asia.

In conclusion, political leaders in East Asia may do well to learn from pre-World War I history, when those enthralled by power politics 'sleepwalked' toward catastrophe. Who can deny that the same risks abound a century later in East Asia? After all, complacency is our own gravest enemy.

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