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Inevitability and War

By Joseph S. Nye, Jr

World War I killed some 20 million people. In one battle, the Somme, 1.3 million were killed and wounded, compared to only 36,000 casualties when Germany defeated Austria a half century earlier. World War I was a horrifying war of trenches, barbed wire, machine guns, and artillery that ground up a generation of Europe's youth. It not only destroyed people, it destroyed three European empires: the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian. Until World War I, the global balance of power was centered in Europe. After World War I, Europe still mattered, but the United States and Japan emerged as great powers. World War I also ushered in the Russian Revolution in 1917, prepared the way for fascism and accelerated the ideological battles that wracked the 20th century.

How could such a catastrophic event happen? Bernhard von Bülow, the German chancellor from 1900 to 1909, met with his successor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, in the chancellor's palace in Berlin shortly after the war broke out. "I said to him, 'Well, tell me, at least, how it all happened.'" He raised his long, thin arms to heaven and answered in a dull, exhausted voice: "Oh, if I only knew!" In many later polemics on war guilt I have often wished it had been possible to produce a snapshot of Bethmann Hollweg standing there at the moment he said those words. Such a photograph would have been the best proof that this wretched man had never wanted war."¹ Perhaps in self-exoneration, Bethmann came to regard the war as inevitable. The British Foreign Minister, Sir Edward Grey agreed. In April 1918, he

said he had “come to think that no human individual could have prevented it.”²

Are there lessons for today? Martin Wolf writes that “history, alas, also teaches us that friction between status quo and revisionist powers may well lead to conflict, however ruinous the consequences. Indeed, Thucydides the great ancient historian, argued that the calamitous Peloponnesian war was due to the alarm that the growing power of Athens inspired in Sparta.”³ Margaret MacMillan adds that “it is tempting – and sobering -- to compare today’s relationship between China and America to that between Germany and Britain a century ago.”⁴ After drawing a similar comparison, *The Economist* concluded that “the most troubling similarity between 1914 and now is complacency.”⁵ And some political scientists like John Mearsheimer have stated that “to put it bluntly, China cannot rise peacefully.”⁶

Citing Thucydides in regard to the rise of China is not new. I plead guilty to having published such a comparison fifteen years ago.⁷ But as Richard Neustadt and Ernest May have warned, historical metaphors and analogies can be misleading when differences in context are not made explicit.⁸ To some extent, World War I was caused by the rise in the power of Germany and the fear that created in Great Britain, but it was also caused by the rise in the power of Russia and the fear that created in Germany, the rise of Slavic nationalism and the fear that created in Austria-Hungary, as well as myriad other factors that differed from ancient Greece. And there is greater difference in the overall power of the US and China today than there was between Germany and Britain in the last century. Metaphors can be useful as general precautions, but they become dangerous when they convey a sense of historical inevitability. There are structural similarities about the three situations – ancient Greece, World War I, and US-China relations – but

also important differences in context that allow opportunities for human agency to matter. In fact, even in the paradigm case of the Peloponnesian War, there was more room for human agency than some of today's commentators realize. Citing Thucydides can become a trap.

Misreading the Peloponnesian War

In the middle of the 5th century BCE, Athens and Sparta had a truce which Corcyra finally convinced Athens to break it with the following argument: "There are three considerable naval powers in Hellas: Athens, Corcyra, and Corinth. If Corinth gets control of us first, and you allow our navy to be united with hers, you will have to fight against the combined fleets of Corcyra and the Peloponnese. But if you receive us into your alliance, you will enter upon the war with our ships as well as your own."⁹ The Athenians decided to break the treaty, because, in Thucydides' words, "the general belief was that whatever happened, war with the Peloponnese was bound to come."¹⁰ Ironically, the belief that war was inevitable played a major role in causing it. Athens felt that if the war was going to come, it was better to have two-to-one naval superiority rather than one-to-two naval inferiority.

Cooperation is difficult to develop when playing a Prisoners' Dilemma game once, or when one thinks the last move in an iterative game is approaching. Game theorists like Robert Axelrod have shown that after many games, on average the best results were obtained by learning to cooperate. But Axelrod warns that cooperation in tit for tat reciprocity is an optimal strategy only when one has a chance to continue the game for a long period, when there is a "long shadow of the future."¹¹ That is why the belief

that war is inevitable is so corrosive in international politics. When you believe war is inevitable, you are very close to the last move. If you suspect your opponent will cheat, it is better to take the risk of defecting rather than cooperating. That is what Athens did, and one sees a similar dynamic as European states debated whether to delay mobilization in July 1914.

But the classical Greek case is not as straightforward as Thucydides asserts. Thucydides concluded that the cause of the war was the growth of the power of Athens and the fear it caused in Sparta. But Donald Kagan has shown that Athenian power was in fact *not* growing. Before the war broke out in 431 B.C. the balance of power had begun to stabilize. And though the Spartans worried about the rise of Athenian power, he contends they had an even greater fear of a slave revolt.

Thus the immediate or precipitating causes of the war were more important than Thucydides's theory of inevitability admits. Corinth, for example, thought Athens would not fight; it misjudged the Athenian response, partly because it was so angry at Corcyra. Pericles overreacted; he made mistakes in giving an ultimatum to Potidaea and in punishing Megara by cutting off its trade. Those policy mistakes made the Spartans think that war might be worth the risk after all. Kagan argues that Athenian growth caused the first Peloponnesian War earlier in the century, but that the Thirty-Year Truce doused that flame. So to start the second Peloponnesian War, "the spark of the Epidamnian trouble needed to land on one of the rare bits of flammable stuff that had not been thoroughly drenched. Thereafter it needed to be continually and vigorously fanned by the Corinthians, soon assisted by the Megarians, Potidaeans, Aeginetans, and the Spartan War Party. Even then the spark might have been extinguished had not the Athenians provided some additional fuel at the crucial moment."¹² In other

words, the war was not caused by impersonal forces but by bad decisions in difficult circumstances.

While there are no absolute answers in debates over structure and agency in human events, very little is ever truly inevitable in history. Human behavior is voluntary, although there are always external constraints. As Marx famously observed, men make history, but not in conditions of their own choosing. The ancient Greeks made flawed choices when they were caught in the situation well described by Thucydides and by Prisoner's Dilemma games. The security dilemma made war highly probable, but *highly probable* is not the same as *inevitable*. The 30-year unlimited war that devastated Athens was not inevitable. Human decisions mattered.

The Multiple Causes of World War I

Generations of historians have examined the origins of World War I. It is impossible to isolate one cause, though Woody Allen tried in his movie "Zelig:" "Britain ruled the world and Germany wanted it." More seriously, parts of the answer lie at each of the three levels of analysis.¹³

At the level of the international system structure, there were two key elements: the rise of German power and the increased rigidity in the alliance systems. The rise of German power was truly impressive. German heavy industry surpassed that of Great Britain in the 1890s. By 1914, Britain's share of the world's industrial production had shrunk to 10 percent, and Germany's share had risen to 15 percent. Germany transformed some of its industrial strength into military capability, including a massive naval

armaments program.¹⁴ A strategic aim of Germany's "Tirpitz Plan" was to build the second largest navy in the world, thereby advancing itself as a world power. This expansion alarmed Britain which began to feel isolated and worried about how it would defend its far-flung empire. In 1907, Sir Eyre Crowe of the British Foreign Office wrote his famous memorandum in which he concluded that although German policy might be vague and confused, Britain could not allow one country to dominate the continent of Europe. Crowe argued that the British response was nearly a law of nature.

Britain's response to Germany's rising power contributed to the second structural cause of the war: the increasing rigidity in the alliance systems in Europe. In 1904, parting from its geographically semi-isolated position as a balancer off the coast of Europe, Britain moved toward an alliance with France, and in 1907, the Anglo-French partnership broadened to include Russia. Germany, seeing itself encircled, tightened its relations with Austria-Hungary. As the alliances became more rigid, diplomatic flexibility was lost. The balance of power no longer featured shifting alignments that characterized Bismarck's era. Instead, the major powers wrapped themselves around two poles that accentuated the security dilemma that defensive realists emphasize. As Clark observes, "the bifurcation into two alliance blocs did not cause the war....yet without the two blocs, the war could not have broken out in the way it did."¹⁵

There were also changes that altered the process of the system that had once been called the "concert of Europe." One was the continuing rise of nationalism. In Eastern Europe, Pan-Slavism threatened both the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, which each had large Slavic populations. German authors wrote about the inevitability of the Teutonic-Slavic battles and schoolbooks inflamed nationalist passions. Nationalism proved to be

stronger than socialism when it came to bonding working classes together, and stronger than the capitalism that bound bankers together. Indeed, it proved stronger than family ties among the monarchs. The Kaiser once hoped that because war was impending over the assassination of a fellow royal, the Czar would see things the same way he did. But by then nationalism had overcome any sense of aristocratic or monarchical solidarity.

A second cause for the loss of moderation in the early twentieth-century balance of power process was a rise in complacency about peace. The great powers had not been involved in a war in Europe for 40 years. There had been crises—in Morocco in 1905–1906, in Bosnia in 1908, in Morocco again in 1911, and the Balkan wars in 1912—but they had all been manageable. However, the diplomatic compromises that resolved these conflicts caused frustration. Afterward, there was a tendency to ask, “Why didn’t we make the other side give up more?” Additionally, there was growing acceptance of social Darwinism. If the strong should prevail, why worry about peace? Long wars seemed unlikely, and many leaders believed short decisive wars won by the strong would be a welcome change.

A third factor contributing to the loss of flexibility in the early twentieth-century balance of power process was German policy. As Eyre Crowe said, it was vague and confusing. There was a terrible clumsiness about the Kaiser’s policy of seeking greater power. The Germans were no different from other colonial powers in having “world ambitions,” but they managed to press them forward in a way that antagonized everybody at the same time—just the opposite of the way Bismarck played the system in the 1870s and 1880s. The Germans antagonized the British by starting a naval arms race. They antagonized the Russians over issues in Turkey and the Balkans.

They antagonized the French over a protectorate in Morocco.

The second level of analysis examines what was happening in domestic society, politics, and government prior to World War I. We can safely reject Lenin's argument that the war was simply the final stage of capitalist imperialism. It did not arise out of imperialist conflicts on the colonial peripheries as Lenin had expected. In 1898, Britain and France confronted each other at Fashoda, and if war had occurred then, it might have fit Lenin's explanation. But the war broke out sixteen years later in Europe, and even then bankers and businessmen strongly resisted it. Sir Edward Grey felt that Britain had to prevent Germany from gaining mastery of the European balance of power. But Grey also worried about getting the London bankers to go along with declaring war, and his Liberal party was split on the issue.

Two other domestic causes need to be taken more seriously: the internal crises of the declining Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, and the domestic political situation in Germany. Both Austria-Hungary and Ottoman Turkey were multinational empires threatened by the rise of nationalism. In addition, the Ottoman government was very weak, very corrupt, and an easy target for nationalist groups in the Balkans that wanted to free themselves from centuries of Turkish rule. The Balkan wars of 1912 pushed the Turks out, but in the next year the Balkan states fell to war among themselves while dividing the spoils. These conflicts whetted the appetite of some Balkan states to fight Austria; if the Turks could be pushed out, then why not the Austrians too?

Serbia took the lead among the Balkan states. Austrian elites feared disintegration and worried about the widespread predictions of decline. In the end, Austria went to war against Serbia not because a Serb assassinated its Archduke, but because Austria wanted to weaken Serbia and prevent it

from becoming a magnet for nationalism among the Balkan Slavs. General Conrad von Hötzendorf, the Austrian chief of staff, stated his motives very clearly: “For this reason, and not as vengeance for the assassination, Austria-Hungary must draw the sword against Serbia. ...The monarchy had been seized by the throat and had to choose between allowing itself to be strangled, and making a last effort to prevent its destruction.”¹⁶ Disintegration of an empire because of nationalism was the more profound cause of the war; not the slain Franz Ferdinand.

Another important domestic-level explanation of World War I lay in the domestic politics of Germany. Many historians now believe that Fritz Fischer and his followers overstated Germany’s social problems as a key cause. For example, Russia’s internal divisions also deserve attention. According to Fischer, Germany’s efforts toward world hegemony were an attempt by German elites to distract attention from the poor domestic integration of an industrializing German society. He notes that Germany was ruled by a domestic coalition of landed aristocrats and some very large industrial capitalists, the Coalition of Rye and Iron. This ruling coalition used expansionist policies to provide foreign adventures instead of domestic reform—circuses in place of bread. They viewed expansionism as an alternative to social democracy. Internal economic and social tensions in Germany are not sufficient to explain World War I, but they do help explain one source of the pressure that Germany put on the international system after 1890.

A final domestic-level explanation appeals to the crisis instability of the situation in the summer of 1914. Military leaders in all countries shared a “cult of the offensive” favoring rapid mobilization and deployment, dramatic strategies involving sudden flanking movements of armies or dramatic

breakthrough assaults, and freewheeling tactics of maneuver. In fact, as military planners discovered the hard way, the prevailing military technology of the day did not favor the offense, but European leaders believed that it did. Once the July crisis hit, leaders felt enormous pressure to get in the first blow. Of course, this particular explanation does not help us understand why Europe sat on a powder keg. It does, however, help us understand why the spark in the Balkans traveled so quickly along the fuse.

What about the first level of analysis, the role of individuals? What distinguished the leadership on the eve of World War I was its mediocrity. The Austro-Hungarian emperor, Franz Joseph (1830–1916), was a tired old man who was putty in the hands of General Conrad and Count Leopold von Berchtold. Ironically, the assassinated Franz Ferdinand, would have been a restraining force. In Russia, Czar Nicholas II was an isolated autocrat who spent most of his time resisting change at home. He was served by incompetent foreign and defense ministers. As MacMillan has put it, “it was Russia’s misfortune, and the world’s, that its leadership was so inadequate as it was about to head into a major international storm.”¹⁷ In Germany, Kaiser Wilhelm II had a great sense of inferiority. He was a blusterer, a weak man who was extremely emotional. While he did not control policy, his position at the apex of the system gave him influence which encouraged Germany into a risky policy without skill or consistency. Personality did make a difference. There was something about the leaders, the Kaiser in particular, that made them significant contributory causes of the war.

Was War Inevitable?

If World War I was over-determined, does that mean it was inevitable? The answer is no; war was not inevitable until it actually broke out in

August 1914. And even then it was not inevitable that four years of carnage had to follow.

Let us distinguish three types of causes in terms of their proximity in time to an event. The most remote are *deep causes*, then come *intermediate causes*, and those immediately before the event are *precipitating causes*. An analogy is building a fire: The logs are the deep cause, the kindling and paper are the intermediate cause, and the actual striking of the match is the precipitating cause.

In World War I, the deep causes were changes in the structure of the balance of power and certain aspects of the domestic political systems. Especially important reasons were the rise of German strength, the development of a bipolar alliance system, the rise of nationalism and the resultant destruction of two declining empires, and German politics. The intermediate causes were German policy, the rise in complacency about peace, and the personal idiosyncrasies of the leaders. The precipitating cause was the assassination of Franz Ferdinand at Sarajevo by a Serbian terrorist and Austria-Hungary's subsequent ultimatum to Serbia.

Looking back, things always look inevitable. Indeed, some structuralists might say that if the assassination had not occurred, some other precipitating incident would have caused the war, because precipitating events are like buses—they come along every ten minutes. Thus the specific event at Sarajevo was not all that important; some incident would probably have occurred sooner or later.

This type of argument can be tested by counterfactual history. What if there had been no assassination in Sarajevo? The deep and intermediate causes suggested a high probability of war, but a high probability is not the same as inevitability. Using the metaphor of the fire again, logs and kindling

may sit for a long time and never be lit. Indeed, if it rains before somebody comes along with a match, they may not catch fire even when a Sarajevo occurs.

Suppose there had been no assassination in Sarajevo in 1914, and no crisis occurred until 1916; what might have happened? One possibility is that the growth in Russian strength might have deterred Germany from recklessly backing Austria. In 1914, General Helmuth von Moltke and Foreign Secretary Gottlieb von Jagow, two of the German leaders who were influential in precipitating the war, believed that war with Russia was inevitable. They knew Germany would have a problem fighting a war on two fronts and would have to knock out one side before fighting the other. Russia, although larger, had a poor transportation system, so it could be put off for the second strike. After victory over France, Germany could turn east and take its time to defeat the Russians. That was the Schlieffen Plan.

But this strategy might have become obsolete by 1916 because Russia was using French money to build railroads. In the 1890s it would have taken the Russians two or three months before they could have transported all their troops to the German front, giving Germany ample time to fight France first. By 1910, that time had shrunk to eighteen days, and the German planners knew they no longer had a large margin of safety. By 1916, the margin would have been gone and Germany might have had to drop its two-front strategy. Consequently, some German leaders thought that a war in 1914 was better than a war later.

If no assassination and crisis had occurred in 1914, and the world had made it to 1916 without a war, it is possible the Germans might have felt deterred, unable to risk a two-front war. They might have been more careful before giving Austria a blank check as they did in 1914. Or they might have

dropped the Schlieffen Plan and concentrated on a war in the east only. Or they might have come to terms with Great Britain or changed their view that the offense had the advantage in warfare. Britain was already having some second thoughts about its alliance with Russia because of Russian actions in Persia and Afghanistan. In summary, in another two years, a variety of changes related to Russian strength might have prevented the war. Without war, German industrial strength would have continued to grow and Germany might have become so strong that France and Britain would have been deterred.

We can also raise counterfactuals about what might have happened in Britain's internal affairs if two more years had passed without war. The Liberal Party was committed to withdrawing British troops from Ireland while the Conservatives, particularly in Northern Ireland, were bitterly opposed. There was a prospect of mutiny in the British army. If the Ulster Revolt had developed further, it is quite plausible that Britain would have been so internally preoccupied that it would not have been able to join the coalition with France and Russia. Certainly many historically significant changes could have occurred in two more years of peace. In terms of the fire metaphor, there was a high probability of rain.

What Kind of War?

Another set of counterfactuals raises questions about what *kind* of war would have occurred rather than *whether* a war would have occurred. It is true that Germany's policies frightened its neighbors and that Germany in turn was afraid of being encircled by the Triple Entente, so it is reasonable to argue that war was more likely than not. But what kind of war? The war did not have to be what we now remember as World War I. Counterfactually,

four other wars were possible.

One was a simple local war – “the third Balkan War”. Initially, German leaders expected a replay of the Bosnian crisis of 1908–1909 when the Germans backed the Austrians, and Austria was therefore able to make Russia stand down in the Balkans. On July 5, 1914, when the Kaiser promised full support to Austria-Hungary, the expectation was for a local war. The Kaiser and officials continued their vacation plans so as to avoid alarming the other Powers. Contrary to some assertions, they were not planning a preventive war.¹⁸ When they realized their miscalculation, the Kaiser made efforts to keep the war from escalating; hence the famous last minute Willie-Nicky telegrams between the Kaiser and the Czar. If such efforts had been successful, we might today recall not World War I, but merely a relatively minor Austro-Serbian War of August 1914.

A second counterfactual possibility was a one-front war. When the Russians mobilized their troops, the Germans also mobilized. The Kaiser asked General von Moltke whether he could limit the preparations to just the eastern front. Moltke replied that it was impossible because any change in the timetables for assembling the troops and supplies would create a logistical nightmare. He told the Kaiser that if he tried to change the plans, he would have a disorganized mass instead of an army. However, there were more possibilities, and had the Germans acted earlier to reassure the French, or had the Kaiser insisted, there might have been a one-front war.¹⁹

A third counterfactual is to imagine a two-front war without Britain: Germany and Austria versus France and Russia . If the British Expeditionary Force had not been there to make the difference, Germany might well have won. It is possible that Britain might not have joined if Germany had not invaded Belgium, although Belgium was not the main cause of Britain

entering the war. For some people, like Sir Edward Grey and the Foreign Office, the main reason for entering the war was the danger of German control of the Continent. But Britain was a democracy, and the Cabinet was split. The left Liberals opposed war, but when Germany swept through Belgium and violated Belgian neutrality, it allowed the pro-war Liberals to overcome the reluctance of the antiwar Liberals and to repair the split in the British government.

Finally, a fourth counterfactual is a war without the United States. Shaking his fist at an American visitor during his post war exile, the Kaiser complained that “you are responsible for my being here.”²⁰ By early 1918, Germany might have won the war if the United States had not tipped the military balance by its entry in 1917. In 1916 Woodrow Wilson won re-election on a platform of staying out of war. One of the reasons the United States became involved was the weakening of Bethmann-Hollweg and the decision of the German military to recommence an unrestricted submarine campaign against Allied and American shipping. There was also some German diplomatic clumsiness when Germany sent the Zimmermann telegram instructing its embassy in Mexico to approach the Mexican government regarding an alliance against the United States – a message that Britain decoded and passed to the U.S. Washington regarded these intercepted instructions as a hostile act. These factors led the United States to enter the war, but even then, it is worth noting that one of the options Wilson considered was “armed neutrality.”²¹

Our counterfactual analysis first suggests ways in which the war might not have occurred in 1914, and second, ways in which the war that occurred did not have to become four years of carnage, which destroyed Europe as the heart of the global balance of power. It suggests that World War I was

probable, but not inevitable. Human choices mattered.

The Funnel of Choices

History is path dependent. Events close in over time, degrees of freedom are lost, and the probability of war increases. But the funnel of choices available to leaders might open up again, and degrees of freedom could be regained. If we start in 1898 and ask what was the most likely war in Europe, the answer would have been war between France and Britain, which were eyeball to eyeball in a colonial dispute in Africa. But after the British and French formed the Entente in 1904, a Franco-British war looked less likely. The first Moroccan crisis in 1905 and the Bosnian crisis in 1908 made war with Germany look more likely. But some interesting events occurred in 1910. Bethmann Hollweg sought détente with Britain. Britain implied that it would remain neutral in any European war if Germany would limit its navy. At that same time, it looked as if renewed colonial friction between Britain and Russia in Asia threatened a collapse or erosion of the Triple Entente. In other words, in 1910 the funnel of choices started to widen again.

But the funnel closed once more in 1911 with the second Moroccan crisis. When France sent troops to help the Sultan of Morocco, Germany demanded compensation in the French Congo and sent a gunboat to Agadir on the coast of Morocco. Britain prepared its fleet. French and German bankers lobbied against war, and the Kaiser pulled back. But these events deeply affected public opinion and raised fears about German intentions.

Although the Balkan wars in 1912 and 1913 and the increased pressure on Austria set the scene for 1914, there was also a renewed effort at détente in 1912. Britain sent Lord Haldane, a prominent Liberal politician, to Berlin,

and the British and Germans resolved a number of the issues. Also, by this time it was clear that Britain had won the naval arms race. Perhaps the funnel would open up again.

In June 1914, the feeling that relations were improving was strong enough for Britain to send four of its Dreadnought battleships to Kiel for a state visit. If Britain had thought war was about to occur, the last thing it would have done was put four of its prime battleships in an enemy harbor. Clearly, the British were not thinking about war at that point. In fact, on June 28, British and German sailors were walking together along the quay in Kiel when they heard the news that a Serbian terrorist had shot an Austrian archduke in a faraway place called Sarajevo. History has its surprises, and once again, *probable* is not the same as *inevitable*.

Contemporary Lessons?

Accidents and personalities and choices make a difference even if they work within limits set by the larger structure, the situation of insecurity that resembles the Prisoner's Dilemma. That was true of both the Peloponnesian War and of World War I. As Christopher Clark has summarized, once catastrophes occur, "they impose on us (or seem to do so) a sense of their necessity. This is a process that unfolds at many levels....The quest for the causes of the war, which for nearly a century has dominated the literature on this conflict, reinforces that tendency: causes trawled from the length and breadth of Europe's pre-war decades are piled like weights on the scale until it tilts from probability to inevitability. Contingency, choice and agency are squeezed out of the field of vision." But Clark concludes that in 1914, "the future was still open – just. For all the hardening of the fronts in both of Europe's armed camps, there were signs

that the moment for a major confrontation might be passing.”²²

Can we draw contemporary lessons from this history? We must be careful because analogies can mislead, and many myths have been created about World War I. For example, some say World War I was a deliberate preventive war by Germany. While some Germans like von Moltke held that view, the evidence shows that key elites did not. Others portray World War I as an accidental war, but it was not purely accidental. Austria went to war deliberately. And if there was to be a war, some in Germany preferred a war in 1914 to a war later. There were miscalculations over the length and depth of the war, but that is not the same as an accidental war. It is also said that the war was caused by an uncontrolled arms race in Europe. But by 1912, the naval arms race was over, and Britain had won. While there was concern in Europe about the growing strength of the armies, the view that the war was precipitated directly by the arms race is too simple.

On the other hand, we can draw some valid warnings from the long slide into World War I. One lesson is to pay attention to the process of a balance-of-power system as well as to its structure or distribution of power. Moderation evolves from the process. Stability is not assured by the distribution of power alone. Another useful lesson is to beware of complacency about peace or believing that the next crisis is going to fit the same pattern as the last crisis: The July Crisis of 1914 was supposed to be a repeat of the Bosnian crisis of 1908, though clearly it was not. World War I was supposed to be a repeat of the Franco-Prussian War. In addition, the experience of World War I suggests it is important to have military forces that are stable in crisis, without any feeling that one must use them or lose them. The railway timetables were not the major determinants of World War I, but they did make it more difficult for political leaders to buy time for

diplomacy.

Today's world is different from the world of 1914 in several important ways: One is that nuclear weapons have given political leaders the equivalent of a crystal ball that shows what their world would look like after escalation. Perhaps if the Emperor, the Kaiser and the Czar had had a crystal ball showing their empires destroyed and their thrones lost in 1918, they would have been more prudent in 1914. Certainly, the crystal ball effect had a strong influence on American and Soviet leaders during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and it would likely have a similar influence on American and Chinese leaders today.

Another change in context, as John Mueller has noted, is that the ideology of war is much weaker in many major societies.²³ In 1914, war was thought to be inevitable, a fatalistic view compounded by the social Darwinist argument that war should be welcome because it would clear the air like a good summer storm. While Winston Churchill was not typical of all his compatriots and there are some myths about the degree of eagerness for war in August 1914, Churchill's *The World Crisis* describes this feeling: "There was a strange temper in the air. Unsatisfied by material prosperity, the nations turned fiercely toward strife, internal or external. National passions, unduly exalted in the decline of religion, burned beneath the surface of nearly every land with fierce, if shrouded, fires. Almost one might think the world wished to suffer. Certainly men were everywhere eager to dare." MacMillan argues that "they accepted the coming of war with resignation and a sense of obligation, persuaded that their nations were the innocent parties ...and the soldiers did indeed tell their families that they would be home for Christmas."²⁴

While nationalism is growing in China today, and the United States

entered two wars after the 9/11 attacks, it is inaccurate to describe the prevailing climate in either country as bellicose or complacent about a limited war. China aspires to play a larger role in its region and the US has allies to whose defense it is committed. Miscalculations are always possible, but they can be managed by the right policy choices. The legitimacy of the Chinese government depends on a high rate of economic growth and the top leaders realize that China will need many decades before it approaches the sophistication of the American economy. Where Germany was pressing hard on Britain's heels (and passed it in industrial strength), the US remains decades ahead of China in overall military, economic, and soft power resources.²⁵ Moreover, China cannot afford a policy like that of the Kaiser's Germany. Too adventuresome a policy risks its gains at home and abroad. Finally, China and the US face a number of issues like energy, climate and financial stability where they have strong incentives to cooperate.

In other words, the United States has more time to manage its relations with a rising power than Britain did a century ago, and China has incentives for restraint. Too much fear can be self-fulfilling. Whether the United States and China will manage their relationship well is another question. Human error and miscalculation are always possible. But that will be a matter of human agency and choice. Among the lessons we should take away from this history of a century ago, is to beware of Greeks, Europeans, (or analysts) bearing analogical gifts, particularly if they have a whiff of inevitability.

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- ¹ Bernhard von Bulow, *Memoires of Prince von Bulow 1909-1919* (Boston, Little Brown, 1932), pp165-6
- ² Quoted in Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, (New York, Basic Books, 1999), p. xxxvi
- ³ Martin Wolf, "China must not copy the Kaiser's errors," *Financial Times*, December 4, 2013
- ⁴ Margaret MacMillan, "The Great War's Ominous Echoes," *New York Times*, December 14, 2013. See also *The War That Ended Peace: The Road to 1914* (New York, Knopf, 2013)
- ⁵ "Look back with angst," *The Economist*, December 21, 2013, p 17
- ⁶ John Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia," Michael Hintze Lecture, University of Sydney, August 5, 2010, www.usyd.edu.au/news/84.html?Newstoryid=5351
- ⁷ See Joseph Nye, Jr., "As China Rises, Must Others Bow?," *The Economist*, June 27, 1998, p23
- ⁸ Richard Neustadt and Ernest May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (New York, Free Press, 1986)
- ⁹ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, (London, Penguin, 1972) p. 57.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 62.
- ¹¹ Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, (New York, Basic, 1981)
- ¹² Donald Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), p. 354. For an alternative interpretation of the realities of Athenian expansion, see G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972), pp. 60, 201–203.
- ¹³ The classic approach is Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State and War* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1959).
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- ¹⁵ Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*. (New York, Harper, 2013, p 123
- ¹⁶ Sidney Fay, *The Origins of the World War*, Vol 2 (New York, MacMillan, 1929) pp185-6
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- ²² Christopher Clark, cited above, pp 362-363
- ²³ John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War*, (New York, Basic, 1988)
- ²⁴ MacMillan, cited above, p 63
- ²⁵ National Intelligence Council, *The World in 2030* (Washington, 2013)