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IS 21st CENTURY ASIA COMPARABLE TO PRE-1914 EUROPE?

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➤ INTRODUCTION

Germany continues to provide a significant number of historical analogies to give meaning to the present and the future. There is Nazi Germany, when comparing dictators to Hitler and denouncing the peril of appeasement, e.g. Iraq in the past and Iran today; then there is Weimar Germany in the 1990s, when humiliating Russia is ill-advised if we are to avoid a nationalist and authoritarian backlash; and Imperial Germany, when China's rising power appears as disruptive to regional and global balance as that of late-19th-century Germany. From the end of the Cold War, realist political scientists¹ declared that the end of bipolarity would mark the return of a dangerous multi-polar system in Europe and Asia, as it had caused many wars in Europe² before 1945. Since the mid-90's, when China began to take the place of Japan as the Asian power that caused most concern for the United States, comparison with Germany before 1914 gradually emerged. This scaremongering was soon criticised by a liberal approach that stressed the importance of economic interdependence, which would prevent the world from a rapid return to destructive wars. Above all, from the late 1990s, the prevailing discourse was of the American superpower and a unipolar world. Any comparison with the past was therefore in vain and marginalised the hypothesis of a power that is a peer competitor to the United States. Nevertheless, this analogy has been gaining ground once more in the past couple of years, with growth in China continuing to rise, whereas the US seems to be losing momentum. Renowned liberal political scientist Joseph Nye, who was once part of President Clinton's team, decries the comparison to the German Empire. He believes the comparison is irrelevant because the US remains much more powerful than China, unlike the power relationship between the United Kingdom and Germany in 1914, and because Washington and Beijing can have a mutually beneficial relationship. On the contrary, naval issues expert John Holmes has an alarmist view, considering the Chinese military challenge to be much more fearsome than the threat Germany posed to the UK, especially at sea³.

The upcoming centenary of the outbreak of World War I encourages renewed study of the topic, using the historical work accumulated for decades on the causes of WWI. Debate over this issue has never ceased, although the political discussion over which State was at fault has quietened down⁴.

¹ Some realists disagree with this point of view: "The tragedy of offensive realism: Classical Realism and the Rise of China", *European Journal of International Relations*, 2010, No. 18(1).

² John Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War", *International Security*, Summer 1990, Robert Jervis, "The Future of World Politics: Will It Resemble to the Past?", *International Security*, Winter 1991/1992, Aaron Friedberg, "Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia", *International Security*, Winter 1993/1994, Aaron Friedberg, "Will Europe Past be Asia's Future?", *Survival*, 2000, 42(3).

³ There have already been skirmishes in 2011. On the latest to date: Joseph Nye, "China Is Not Imperial Germany", *The Clear World*, February 27, 2013: http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2013/02/27/china_is_not_imperial_germany_100580.html, James R. Holmes, "Three Reasons Why China Is Not Imperial Germany (It's Tougher)", *The Diplomat* blog, March 5, 2013: <http://thediplomat.com/the-naval-diplomat/2013/03/05/three-reasons-why-china-isnt-imperial-germany-its-tougher/>

⁴ For a long time, this was a major diplomatic challenge: Keith Wilson (ed.), *Forging the Collective Memory. Government and International Historians through Two World Wars*, Providence, Berghahn Books, 1996. The debate started again in the 1960's with Fritz Fischer's thesis, asserting Germany's responsibility, but its reception was mainly a cause for controversy in this country (see special report in *Journal of Contemporary*

However, very little interest is shown for this subject in France⁵. This accorded significant importance to the translation of the book by Prussia historian Christopher Clark⁶, while the chapter on this topic in the French adaptation of the Cambridge History of the First World War is very disappointing⁷. It highlights the root causes, industrialisation, demographic transformations and urbanisation, democratisation and patriotic pride, which remain broad and could easily be applied to Asia.

The “root” or “structural” causes of World War I are usually analysed in order to explain why it was virtually unavoidable. If the war had broken out during the Moroccan or Balkan crises (respectively 1905 and 1911, 1908 and 1912-13), historians and political scientists would have also aimed at explaining why an array of causes had inevitably led to war at that time. The latter endeavour to single out one of these causes, usually to explain the causes of the (major) wars and to try to predict if they might happen again. Politicians also drew lessons which guided their behaviour, or even their choices. The same is true for the 1930s. We may still consider today that faced with Nazi Germany, the British and the French should have created more alliances and launched an arms race to dissuade and fetter Germany. But leaders believed, as did most commentators, that these same strategies had led to war in 1914. The British tried to make their intentions clearer than in 1914 and attempted to establish a sort of European concert through negotiations (Munich in September 1938). In 1914, London had not made its intentions obvious, and its attempt to orchestrate negotiation among the great powers had not been sufficient. Today, it is commonly considered that appeasement was a rational strategy to buy some time and prepare for war⁸. However, it is more likely that the British mostly wanted to avoid a conflict that would have disastrous consequences; they considered, during the Munich crisis, that avoiding a war at a specific time, though it might not delay its inevitable outbreak, may never take place⁹. It is still credible today that avoiding a war in summer 1914 was not bound to lead to another one, two or five years later. Of course, much more work is devoted to the causes of wars than the causes of their absence or of the lack of crisis resolution. As for the Cold War, the opposite is true: for the “long peace” (an expression coined by historian John Lewis Gaddis), which seems over-determined, it makes sense to analyse not what could have lead to a ravaging war, but how war was prevented (whether it comes to structural causes or leaders’ decisions during the crises, especially Cuba’s, during which Kennedy was influenced by his readings on the crisis of July 1914).

History, 2013, No. 48(2). In the 90s, the spotlight turned to Austria’s responsibility (Pierre Grosser, “Vienne, fossoyeur de l’Europe”, *L’Histoire*, October 2, 2003). In this “blame game”, fingers were pointed at Russia and France once more: Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War*, Cambridge (Mass.), Belknap Press, 2011, Stefan Schmidt, *Frankreichs Aussenpolitik in der Julikrise 1914 : Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Ausbruchs des Ersten Weltkrieges*, Munich, Oldenbourg, 2009.

⁵ J.F.V. Keiger, “The Fischer Controversy, The War Origins Debate and France: A Non-History”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 2013, No. 48(2).

⁶ Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers. Summer 1914: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, Paris, Flammarion, 2013.

⁷ Volker R. Berghahn, “Origines”, In: Jay Winter and Annette Becker (dir.) *La Première Guerre Mondiale. Volume 1: Combats*, Paris, Fayard, 2013.

⁸ Daniel Treisman, “Rational Appeasement”, *International Organization*, Spring 2004, Norrin Ripsman and Jack S. Levy, “Wishful Thinking or Buying Time?” The Logic of British Appeasement in the 1930s”, *International Security*, Autumn 2008, and the debate in *International Security*, Summer 2009.

⁹ For a last report on the debates and recent references, see Pierre Grosser, *A Pact with the devil? The Challenges of Contemporary Diplomacy*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2013, chapter 1.

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This study will take the most recent historiography of the causes of WWI and compare them with the prospective reflection (and sometimes assertions) on the future of Asia and especially the potential consequences of China's rise, with greater emphasis on the former rather than the latter. First of all, hypotheses on the hegemonic war will be compared with historical realities. The root and immediate causes, which are put forward to explain the progression towards war, will then be gathered. The goal will be to understand if they have an effect on present-day and future Asia. The conclusion will look at the factors that seem to go against the idea of an "inevitable" war in Asia, then come back to a historiography of WWI which moves away from a determinist questioning and now looks at the ways to avoid war that were not successful in 1914.

■ **PART I: REFLEXIONS ON HEGEMONIC CYCLES AND TRANSITIONS AND THE ISSUE OF
“CHALLENGERS”**

I. A NARRATIVE CENTERED ON HEGEMONIC CYCLES

Since the 1950s, and especially since the 70s, another approach has competed with the traditional ways of thinking about power centres. It is no longer simply an international system structured by a multipolar, then bipolar distribution of power. The system could be described as mainly hierarchical. At the top, one power would provide certain public goods, such as security (ensuring even distribution, policing the global commons, in particular the oceans) and prosperity tools (financial centre, free trade ideology). This way, this power would not provoke a traditional “balancing” reaction to a dominant power. There was no widespread alliance opposite the United Kingdom in the 19th century, nor has there been one to challenge the United States since 1945. Although some theorists have been tempted to go back in time, distorting historical facts and taking inspiration from Braudel and Wallenstein’s work on the “world-systems”, the theory mainly applies to the 19th and 20th centuries, i.e. *pax britannica* and *pax americana*. Most of these theories aim to deduce why there has not been any world war between 1815 and 1914, and since 1945.

1. From “pax britannica” to “pax sinica”?

It seems essential to recall the historical narrative of this perspective, especially as it continues to spark many debates, sometimes indirectly. We could say that the reason for the lack of world war after the dreadful 1792-1815 sequence is due to British hegemony. However, at the end of the 19th century, the UK started to decline, while a “challenger” appeared: Germany, unified in 1871. Its non-acceptance of British hegemony led to two world wars. After WWI, the UK could no longer assume its hegemonic role, and the US didn’t want it, as they did not ratify the Treaty of Versailles and their actions during the economic crisis of the ‘30s were focused on US interests. Consequently, World War II was unavoidable.

Fortunately, from 1944-45 on, the United States would finally replace the British as the hegemonic power, which was symbolised by the creation of the UN and the Bretton Woods Agreement. They appeared even more “selfless” in assisting Western Europe and Japan in their recovery, and provided protection from a new challenger: the Soviet Union. In the 1970s, this hegemony seemed to be severely weakened: the dollar was no longer convertible to gold, economic problems abounded along with the political crisis (the Watergate scandal) and military defeat in Vietnam. Concern was immediately expressed as the situation could be compared to that of the early 20th century, and the “new world disorder” could lead to a world war. Even the “defeat” of the Soviet challenger could not provide a sense of security. In 1989, many wondered whether Japan, because of its economic success, was to become a new challenger (with alarmist books being published on a future war between the US and Japan as Asia’s new leading power), or if a hegemonic transition, this time more peaceful, would lead to *Pax Nipponica*, which Japan may not have been able to assume. The debate did not last, as Japan sank into stagnation. Meanwhile, analyses on the unipolarity of the new international system increased, especially in the second half of the 1990s. Part of the neoconservatives’ thinking emphasized the benevolent American hegemony and the unique

historical mission of the Anglo-Saxon powers, which was to carry the burden of a hegemony that benefits the entire world. However, from the middle of the 90's, China's strong economic growth raised questions: is China a new challenger, or could it become the new hegemonic power, with *Pax Sinica* replacing *Pax Britannica* and *Pax Americana*?

2. *Did the hegemonic powers make the wrong choices?*

Between 1970 and 1990, the question of how the British had lost their hegemony was increasingly studied. Two main questions were raised. The first concerns British choices in 1914 and 1939. Confronted with the German challenger, was war the only solution? Did Edward Grey, head of the Foreign Office in 1914, abandon the sound British tradition of maintaining the balance of power in Europe from a distance, without committing to restrictive alliances? When he chose to forge ties with France, and even Russia, when these two imperial States were traditionally the UK's rivals, and to lead an overly hostile policy towards Germany, not only did he put the latter in an impossible position, but he also contributed to creating a world war situation. This war weakened the world domination of British finance, and destabilised the Empire from 1919 onward, despite significant expansion in the Middle-East. Above all, it had disastrous consequences, such as the revolutionary wave and the birth of the Soviet Union, the rise of fascism and the assertion of Nazism, and economic crisis, which prevented any real recovery of the supremacy of British finance, despite many sacrifices.

Since then, British policy in the inter-war period was over-determined. London was no longer to forge ties with France, and refused all alliance treaties and binding commitments. Germany's relative return to power had to be accepted in order to balance the power of France, contain the Soviet Union and revive the European economy. Appeasement made sense, as another war would be even worse for British power than the previous one. It would irretrievably lower the UK's status compared to the US, trigger a new revolutionary wave, enable the spread of communism in the ensuing chaos, and permanently weaken the Empire through the stimulation of nationalisms. In fact, the US came out of WWI as the dominating power. The Soviet Union, despite huge losses, also became a superpower, and communism extended to Eastern Europe and Asia (North Korea, soon followed by China and Vietnam). It is true the word "superpower", when first used in 1944 by William T.R. Fox, included the United Kingdom, but it soon lost its Empire. Since then, while Chamberlain's policy began to be somewhat restored, Churchill was bringing Britain's reign as a superpower to an end. He wanted to wage outright war and was mistaken in illusive solidarity between the Anglo-Saxon countries, which only benefited the US. The guarantee given to Poland in March 1939 may well have pushed the UK to enter the war in September, which was not necessarily the right choice. Of course, this reconstruction, supported by historian John Charmley¹⁰, put all moral considerations to one side. This is not, however, exclusive to British history.

At the end of the Cold War, when the two great winners seemed to be a unified Germany and an economically-booming Japan, the US began to wonder if its efforts to fight the Soviet Union, and the

¹⁰ For WWI and an analysis of Grey, Splendid Isolation? Britain, the Balance of Power and the Origins of the First World War, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1999.

protection granted to Western Europe and Eastern Asia – which showed little gratitude, free-riding on the coattails of American hegemony – had not been debatable choices for the future of the American power. Comparison with 1914, 1939 and 1989 does not end there. Did the United States not make the mistake of waging a war on terrorism after 9/11, involving more wars, international engagements and costs, which were officially meant to benefit all, as no one could, nor wanted, to deal with it? From then on, China was able to focus on its economic growth, render the US financially dependent, take advantage of the after-effects of American wars, and show at the same time that it not imperialist. It placed itself in a position of potential hegemonic successor, as the US did in 1945. The well-known American “rebalancing” toward Asia, combined with the announcement of the end of the “Global War on Terror”, the withdrawal from Iraqi and Afghan conflicts, the reluctance to engage its military in Iran or Syria and the efforts to re-establish the bases of American economic power after the crisis of 2008, would then be a perfectly logical way to preserve American hegemony. It is however difficult to consider terrorism to be a new challenger, equivalent to Germany and the Soviet Union, and that the US may one day find itself in great military difficulty (as was the case for the UK in 1917 and in 1940), and owe their survival to China’s joining the war, the same way the US had assisted the UK.

3. A “peaceful” transition?

We may consider that there is always a third state to take advantage of wars waged by the hegemonic power against the challenger. However, hegemonic transitions always occur without war between the State seeking hegemony and the power in place. Even though, in the 19th century, British-American relations were difficult, and though British war plans against the United States persisted until the early 1920s, the United Kingdom was the US’ main economic partner, despite late abolition of slavery, in the same way as the Americans prioritized trade over human rights since the middle of the 1990s. At the turn of the century, the UK accepted the US’ supremacy over Latin America and did not consider it an enemy. In the 19th century, the Americans were fascinated by the British, just as the Chinese are fascinated by the US. Most of all, American involvement enabled the UK to win WWII and save its Empire, although during the war, the priority given by Churchill to the Empire, and thus to British interests only, irritated the US. Far from contributing to undermine the British Empire, the Americans supported British presence in the Middle-East and in Asia. The British, having been Russia’s rivals since the beginning of the 19th century, drew the Americans into a “containment” policy towards the Soviet Union, using the US to maintain their own positions. Britain was not on the decline just yet. The UK continued to be a great power during the interwar years, and remained a major world power until the 1960s. For example, the Suez Crisis did not damage the British influence in the Middle-East, and even less so in the Gulf¹¹. In a way, the “special relationship” was thus profitable to Washington and London, and ensured a gradual transition. The United States was far from assuming the burden of defending the entire Western world right after 1945. When, in the ‘70s, the American power was in trouble, hegemony became more multilateral. This was the goal of the Trilateral Commission and the G7, which brought together Europeans and Japanese. From 1987, and again since 2007, when an economically struggling United States started to feel concerned

¹¹ Simon C. Smith, *Ending Empire in the Middle East. Britain, the United States and Post-War Decolonization, 1945-73*, London, Routledge, 2012; G.C. Peden, “Suez and Britain’s Decline as a World Power”, *The Historical Journal*, December 2012.

about the growing power of Japan, followed by China, the US sought to take advantage of these two countries' financial power, in particular to offset the US' trade deficit, and to buy the American debt. They encouraged them to take on international responsibilities, and even, for Japan, to apply the "checkbook diplomacy" during the Gulf war. This gave rise to the "American-Japanese axis"; today, we talk of the G2 or "Chinamerica". The US lived on credit in the past thanks to Japanese savings; today it is thanks to the Chinese purchase of American debt.

II. REVIEWING THEORY AND SPECULATION IN THE LIGHT OF EARLY 20TH CENTURY HISTORY

The question is therefore to establish whether China is the next leader, which could result in a pacific transition – especially if China becomes aware of this role – or if it is a new challenger. Beyond the questioning of Chinese intentions, we should go over the bases of the numerous arguments presented in American and Chinese discourse and publications.

1. *The theory of British hegemony remains weak*

First of all, it seems irrelevant to compare the United Kingdom of 1914 with contemporary United States. It is true that the UK was not only a naval power but also had its Army in India, sending "indigenous" troops to Africa, Eastern Asia and Afghanistan¹². Part of its strategy consisted in being able to strike and punish from the sea, using its network of bases and its domination of the seas, with the same strategy they used during the Battle of Copenhagen 1807. But the UK was not a great military power, capable of waging a major conventional war against its enemies alone. It had no influence on the external (or even internal) policy of other independent States, similar to the US since 1945 in Europe or Eastern Asia. It did not have longstanding alliances in every region of the world. It was more militarily vulnerable than the US, and was moreover dependent on external supply. Although it remained an unquestioned financial power – and the greatest world power generally – it was economically overtaken by the US and caught up by Germany before 1914. It had to face powerful "newcomers" – namely these two countries, whose emergence is increasingly subjected to comparisons and ties¹³, as well as Japan – all the while dealing with its conventional rivals (France, Russia). The situation is therefore different for the US today. Aside from the discourse on the end of unipolarity, it is generally acknowledged that the US remains the world's dominant power, and by far. The decline of American hegemony in Asia has now been predicted for a half a century, after the "Nixon Doctrine" and the end of the Vietnam War, and again after the end of the Cold War. The American "comeback" in Asia, declared in the middle of Obama's first mandate, is

¹² This "omission" of the British Raj is one of the criticisms by historians of political scientists who think in terms of hegemonic cycles: Edward Ingram, "Hegemony, Global Reach, and World Power: Great Britain's Long Cycle", in: Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Erman (eds.), *Bridges and Boundaries. Historians, Political Scientists, and the Study of International Relations*, Cambridge (Mass.), MIT Press, 2001.

¹³ Brendan Simms, *Europe. The Struggle for Supremacy, from 1453 to the Present*, New York, Basic Books, 2013, chapter 5.

therefore not worthy of the name, as a number of Chinese diplomats have venomously pointed out¹⁴.

2. *Germany: A late challenger in the game*

Secondly, we may wonder if Germany really was the challenger of British hegemony. The question of Anglo-German antagonism has long been prominent in WWI historiography, succeeding the significant history of French-German rivalry, which dominated all discussions as to who was guilty in the outbreak of the war¹⁵. The real question under discussion is the estimation of British perception of the German threat. Similar to US perception of the Chinese threat today, there was concern in the UK toward Germany. Since the 1890s there was a wave of spy mania, fuelled by crime fiction bestsellers and mainstream newspapers. This spy mania and the fear of German espionage led to the creation of the *Secret Service Bureau* in 1909, which was divided a year later into the “Home Section” (soon to be MI5) and the “Foreign Section” (later MI6). Despite this obsession, not a single German agent was arrested in the first two years of the service. The MI5 endeavoured to identify German and Austrian citizens living in the UK, with the help of local police. From 1911, it began to intercept mail and drew up a list of “agents” to arrest in the event of a war. As soon as the war was declared, a raid was launched to round them up, the proclaimed effectiveness of which resulted in the vote of the *Defence of the Realm Act* and the *Aliens Restriction Act*. It also ensured the survival of the service, threatened by a Labour Party campaign in 1919. Nonetheless, the study of archives recently made available leaves doubts as to the actual effectiveness of this operation, and as to the real existence of an organised German espionage network. The latter mainly focused on the technological dimensions of the British navy, but overlooked the Expeditionary Force which supported the French army from the beginning of the war. The German intelligence service gave priority to French and Russian military preparations, but in no way did it plan the invasion of the British Isles¹⁶.

The German naval threat was taken seriously, especially by naval attachés. It replaced the fear of a coalition of French and Russian naval forces to disrupt British naval traffic. This fear, rather than that of German battleships, mobilized the Navy’s strategists¹⁷, although the “German threat” (and the threat of German invasion¹⁸) had a major role in the “rebalancing” of the Navy from the Empire to the north-western seas of Europe. We should not, however, overemphasize this fear. Although the Navy remained an essential weapon in the event of a war against Germany, the Anglo-German naval arms race ended in 1912, and the British had won it, though there were no definitive commitments from Berlin. The British had preserved their supremacy, even though German programmes had

¹⁴ Concerning Southeastern Asia, see “Les Etats-Unis et l’Asie du Sud-est depuis le milieu des années 1970”, In: Pierre Journoud (ed.) *L’évolution du débat stratégique en Asie du Sud-est depuis 1945*, Paris, IRSEM, 2012.

¹⁵ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860-1914*, New York, Humanity Books, 1980.

¹⁶ Christopher Andrew, *In Defence of the Realm. The Authorized History of MI5*, London, Allen Lane, 2009, chapter 1, Nicholas Hiley “Entering the Lists: MI5’s Great Spy Round-up of August 1914”. *Intelligence and National Security*. February 2006.

¹⁷ Matthew S. Seligmann, *The Royal Navy and the German Threat, 1901-1914. Admiralty Plans to Protect British Trade in a War against Germany*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012 and “The Renaissance of the Pre-First World War Naval History”, *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2013, No. 36(3).

¹⁸ David Gethin Morgan-Owen, “History is a Record of Exploded Ideas: Sir John Fisher and Home Defense, 1904-1910”, *The International History Review*.

contributed to widening the gap between London and Berlin¹⁹. The challenging of the dominating naval power had shown its limits, as had that launched by the Soviet Union on the US in the 1960s. This period is much analysed in China, where the study of the rise of the great powers dwells on the hubris of Germany, which, despite unquestionable technological and intellectual assets, could not displace the British power. The build-up of the continental powers' naval forces is the subject of historical reflection, at a time when the Chinese Navy is gathering momentum²⁰. The most alarmist strategists about the Chinese navy consider that China is more determined than Germany, and that the maritime resources at stake off the coast of China are more important to the United States than the North Sea was to the British²¹ – which is quite debatable. Naval construction efforts do not have the same symbolic significance than at the very beginning of the 20th century. It is true that the construction of a Chinese aircraft carrier is not only the result of strategic calculation in Beijing, but also a sign of “naval nationalism”²². However, unlike a century ago, popular navalism is not a means to circumvent the constraints imposed by financial balance disciples or Army officers. Nor is it a means of rallying public opinion through a show of “virility” and “technological modernity” in the naval sector²³, except when it is a deliberate attempt to distract the general public's attention, uniting it through incidents with Japanese ships. Lastly, the challenge to the American domination of the commons²⁴ could, from now on, be a space race and its militarization, rather than a naval arms race, with the same quest for prestige, “rallying around the flag” and modernist pride. Since the Chinese anti-satellite capabilities were discovered during a test in 2007, a “security dilemma” seems to have materialised, with its share of dramatization similar to that in the UK from 1905-1906²⁵, and a renewal of American efforts²⁶. The race could even concern all the Asian powers, with Russia and Japan renewing its efforts, and India entering the game.

Before 1914, the UK had never been at war with Germany, whereas the Americans fought the Chinese troops in Korea. Germany had not been a revolutionary power using radical, counter-hegemonic propaganda, whereas in the 1950s and 1960s, China was considered the ultimate

¹⁹ Michael Epkenhans, “Was a Peaceful Outcome Thinkable? The Naval Race before 1914”, In: Holger Hafflerbach and David Stevenson (eds.), *An Improbable War? The Outbreak of World War One and European Political Culture before 1914*, London, Berghahn Books, 2007.

²⁰ Andrew S. Erickson, Lyle J. Goldstein and Carnes Lord (eds.), *China Goes to Sea. Maritime Transformation in Comparative Historical Perspective*, Annapolis (Ma.) Naval Institute Press, 2009, in particular Holger Hergig, “Imperial Germany: Continental Titan, Global Aspirant” and Andrew S. Erickson and Lyle J. Goldstein, “China Studies the Rise of the Great Powers”.

²¹ Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific. China's Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy*, Annapolis (Ma.), Naval Institute Press, 2010, chapter 3.

²² Robert S. Ross, “China's Naval Nationalism: Sources, Prospects, and the US Response”, *International Security*, Autumn 2009 and the discussion in *International Security*, Autumn 2010.

²³ Jan Rüger, *The Great Naval Game. Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, And J. Charles Schenking, *Making Waves. Propaganda and the Emergence of the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1868-1922*. Stanford University Press, 2005.

²⁴ Barry Posen, “Command of the Commons: The Military Foundations of US Hegemony”, *International Security*, Summer 2003.

²⁵ Baohui Zhang, “The Security Dilemma in the US-China Military Space Relationship. The Prospects for Arms Control”, *Asian Survey*, March-April 2011, Eric Hagt and Matthieu Durnin, “Space, China's Tactical Frontier”, *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, October 2011 (and David Wright's more moderate approach).

²⁶ Xavier Pasco, “Le recentrage politique du secteur spatial de défense des Etats-Unis, Fondation” for the Foundation for Strategic Research, June 2013.

disruptive power, and became the country to cause most concern to Washington²⁷. Unlike Bismarckian policy, communist China asserted itself after 1949 against the system in place. In a way, Germany became more and more revisionist from the 1870s to the 1930s, whereas China seemed to follow the opposite trend from the 1950s to 2000s – although counter-hegemonic socialist discourse has far from disappeared²⁸. The lessons from history are this time reversed: for Germany to cooperate and renounce its ambitions after 1939, it had to be crushed, and the Allies had to go as far as Berlin to obtain an unconditional surrender and re-educate the Germans. This hard-line policy was suggested for Serbia, and applied in Iraq. On the contrary, for communist China, it was a sign of moderation, openness and socialisation that the US did not bomb its nuclear plants and allowed it to obtain the atomic bomb (1964), and especially that American diplomats travelled to Beijing in 1971-72 and recognised the regime in 1978. This diplomatic leap could be a model for countries such as Iran²⁹. Although Germany and present-day China do not want to relive the time when the battle for power took place on their soil, and were reduced to “objects” rather than “subjects” of international relations (the Thirty Years’ War, “the century of humiliation”)³⁰, the Chinese complain much less than Germany did about not having a starring role on the international stage. Of course, WWI (and WWII) saw widespread anti-German propaganda in the UK and anti-British propaganda in Germany. Nonetheless, historians show today how much the two countries shared mutual admiration and maintained frequent cultural exchanges³¹. We shall not linger on the mutual perceptions between the US and China, but the former shows little admiration for Chinese culture. The US has always had a paternalist approach toward China, which they believed could only become modern if it was more like the US; there is also less dialogue between their leaders.

The numerous links between the United Kingdom and Germany could prompt a counterfactual history: had the UK not entered the war in 1914, wouldn’t European history consist in a UK, the world’s financial and imperial power, thriving in relationship with a Germany whose industrial power dominates the continent? Is this not the situation today? Couldn’t we, then, have prevented two world wars, communism, Nazism, the Holocaust and the Cold War? This is more or less implied by the well-known British historian Niall Ferguson, today a major figure in economic and international issues in the US³². This causes unease in the UK with the upcoming centenary: was the war started in 1914 a just war, was it the product of unreasonable forces of militarism and nationalism, or could it

²⁷ Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *The China Threat: Memories, Myths, and realities in the 1950s*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2012.

²⁸ Hung-Jen Wang, “Being Uniquely Universal: Building Chinese International Relations Theory”, *The Journal of Contemporary China*, 2013, No. 22(81).

²⁹ Pierre Grosser, *A Pact with the devil?* op. cit., first part.

³⁰ Kevin Cramer, “Religious War, German War, Total War: The Shadow of the Thirty Years War on German War Making in the Twentieth Century”, in: Jenny Macleod (ed.), *Defeat & Memory. Cultural Histories of Military Defeat in the Modern Era*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2008, Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation. Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*, Cambridge (Mass.), Columbia University Press, 2012.

³¹ Jan Rüger, “Revisiting the Anglo-German Antagonism”, *The Journal of Modern History*, September 2011, Richard Scully, *British Images of Germany. Admiration, Antagonism and Ambivalence, 1860-1914*, Basingstoke, MacMillan, 2012.

³² Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War*. London, Allen Lane, 1998, and especially “The Kaiser’s European Union. What if Britain had “stood aside” in August 1914?” In Niall Ferguson (ed.), *Virtual History. Alternatives and Counterfactuals*, London, Picador, 1997. For a critical argument, T.G. Otte, “Neo-Revisionism or the Emperor’s New Clothes. Some Reflections on Niall Ferguson and the Origins of the World War I”, *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 2000, No. 11(1).

have been prevented if the elites in power had not made criminal choices³³? The tone of the commemoration may only be influenced by answers to these questions, as well as reflection on future wars.

3. *World War I was not caused by Anglo-German antagonism*

Thirdly, there is no certainty that WWI may be interpreted as a conflict between a hegemonic power (the UK) and a challenger (Germany), which compromises the analogy with the Sino-American rivalry³⁴. If Germany's rise in power was permitted by the international system as it was, why did Germany want to change it? It was actually more concerned by France and Russia than by the UK³⁵. In the years after 1910, the *Weltpolitik* was relegated to a position of secondary importance (aside from in the Ottoman Empire, the Pacific and, to a lesser extent, Latin America), while Germany focused on its security situation in Europe. The UK was not at the heart of July 1914's crisis. Before the outbreak of the two world wars, the Germans would sooner have "neutralised" the British³⁶ – even though we may consider that the real world rivalry would eventually have been between the British Empire and Germany, dominating the European continent, as Hitler's perspective for the future was a gigantic battle between greater Germany (and its satellites) and the United States. The British showed no sign of wanting any preventive war to impede the assertion of a challenger; they only needed to avoid a German victory as it would have enabled Germany to dominate Europe and therefore jeopardise British security. However, the issue did not concern the German "structural" power, but rather the conduct of the "Prussian" military elite, which moreover, violated Belgium's neutrality³⁷.

However, the only other significant enemy for the Chinese is the United States. The latter are ritually accused of not wanting to let the Chinese power grow. At the beginning of the 20th century, the architect of Germany's encirclement was France rather than the UK, with whom the Reich negotiated several times to forge stronger ties (we can hardly imagine Beijing seeking to become so close to Washington as to eventually forgo its relationship with Tokyo). Today, it is the US that seems to orchestrate the encirclement of China, from Afghanistan to South Korea, through India and Vietnam, although Japan sometimes engages in active diplomacy toward India and Australia. For China, there is no fear of a surge of Russian hordes like there was in Germany in the early 20th century (it would rather be for Russia to worry of an overflowing China invading the vacant far eastern territory). Although historical rivalry with Japan exists, China does not really fear a revanchist sentiment that would lead to a war to reclaim territories given up in 1945, such as Germany feared from the French after 1871.

To conclude this reflection on the question of hegemonic transition, it appears that the historical bases of this argument are quite weak, unless we look at the bigger picture and imagine structural

³³ For the first thesis, Gary Sheffield, "The Great War was a Just War", *History Today*, 2013, No. 63(8), for the second Richard J. Evans, "Michael Grove's History Wars", *The Guardian*, July 13, 2013.

³⁴ Steve Chan, *Enduring Rivalries in the Asia-Pacific*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, chapter 4

³⁵ Politics scientist Dale C. Copeland even declares, probably with exaggeration, that the two world wars are mostly preventive wars of Germany against Russia.

³⁶ Steve Chan, *China, the U.S., and the Power-Transition Theory. A Critique*, New York, Routledge, 2008, p. 51sq

³⁷ Zara S. Steiner and Keith Neilson, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2nd ed., 2003, chapter 9.

recurrences (and even “laws of history”), from an extremely limited number of cases, and rule out multiple variables. The variety of scenarios on hegemonic transition opens an array of possibilities, from the persistence of “*Pax Americana*” to the establishing of a “*Pax Sinica*” (or the “*Pax Nipponica*” of the past), including a hegemonic transition war and the forms of “bigemony” or “liberal/capitalist peace”³⁸. The question remains as to whether a hegemonic transition is peaceful only when a democratic power (the US) succeeds another (the UK). This brings us to the “democratic peace” theory, according to which democracies do not wage war on each other, and may even limit themselves through international institutions, while possessing a transparent political system that enables mutual influence. Non-democratic powers can then only be challengers, not only of the hegemon’s power, but also of its values. Democracies would therefore lead “crusades” against them and ultimately triumph, if we consider that democracies are more efficient in long wars that imply large mobilisation. Germany would then be the ancestor of the “rogue states” that are internally authoritarian, and towards the outside world, are aggressive “outlaws”.

III. THE ISSUE OF REGIONAL HEGEMONY

Behind the official Chinese discourse on harmony, and beyond the reflection on a uniquely Chinese cultural and historic approach to international relations – and assuming that it is more than a simple front to avoid appearing as a new Germany or Soviet Union – there is another advantage to the traditional Sinocentric international system³⁹. To put it simply, this system would have been much more peaceful than the Westphalian sovereignty implemented in Europe, it would have contributed to regional trade, and was little intrusive in the internal policies of the Chinese Empire’s “vassals”. The West would have destroyed it (and so would Japan, imitating the West), pushing for so-called equality between States and a sovereignty of “vassals” to better impose its imperialism later and reduce (or even remove) the sovereignty of the countries in the region. Asia would then have been subjected to colonialism, imperialism, wars and patches of cold wars, possibly across whole countries (China, Korea). *Pax sinica* would have existed in the past, whereas the *pax britannica* of the 19th century was made up of imperialism and colonialism, and the *pax americana* since 1945 would be formed by hegemonism and repeated military interventions across the globe. Taking the unique Chinese approach would be a way to prevent the distrust and conflict escalation between the US and China: the Statist “Westphalian” way of thinking can only lead the two states to chaos. Consequently, the Chinese should not respond to American “power politics” and the discourse on the “China threat”⁴⁰. At the head of the Chinese State, and in best-selling publications on the topic,

³⁸ A cornerstone of political science in Japan, Takashi Inoguchi put forth this scenario at the beginning of the 1990s. For scenarios centred on China and an overview of theories: David P. Rapkin and William R. Thompson, *Transition Scenarios. China and the United States in the Twenty-First Century*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013.

³⁹ See previous study *L’Asie du Nord-Est face à la montée en puissance de la Chine. Une région aux héritages historiques structurants, mais qui ne fait pas système*, IRSEM, 2011, Part I, as well as the excellent dossier in the *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 2013, No. 13(2).

⁴⁰ Qin Yaqing, “Relationality and processual construction: bringing Chinese ideas into International Relations theory”, *Social Sciences in China*, August 2009, L.H.M. Ling, “Worlds beyond Westphalia: Daoist Dialectics and the China Threat”, *The Review of International Studies*, July 2013, Yongnian Zheng, “The Rediscovery of Tianxia World Order”, in: Gilbert Rozman (ed.) *National Identities and Bilateral Relations*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2013.

IS 21ST CENTURY ASIA COMPARABLE TO PRE-1914 EUROPE?

Chinese civilisation is historically associated with peace and harmony, whereas Western civilisation, besides declining, would bring wars, violence, and imperialism⁴¹. If 21st century Asia can be compared to pre-1914 Europe, it is because the West maintains its presence in Asia – regardless of whether China, highly sensitive about its sovereignty, is a “super-Westphalian” State or has taken a Westphalian approach faced with a “post-Westphalian” America and Europe⁴².

Meanwhile, the United States is compared to a “Middle Kingdom” in which South Korea and Australia would be prominent “vassals”, followed by Japan, then the Philippines and Thailand⁴³. Sino-American rivalry would then consist in a struggle for influence over the small States neighbouring China to the south and the east. Myanmar’s “opening” to the West in 2012 was partly due to the junta trying to avoid a confrontation with an economically-encroaching China. Some foresee a similar reaction from North Korea. Cambodia, once aligned with the Chinese stance, might also distance itself. French Indochina long mocked the fickleness of Siam, which would always choose to follow the most powerful, be it Japan in 1940 or the US from 1950 (mainly to prevent it from being enveloped by China). Beyond their growing ties, Vietnam and South Korea seem to have maintained the habit of entering into unequal relationships with great powers, Vietnam reaching out to the US, South Korea increasing economic ties with China⁴⁴. Unfortunately, this in-between situation has been little explored with a focus on the small countries of Western Europe before 1914 (and even until 1945), as reference is especially made to the “Misery of the Small Eastern European States” (Istvan Bibó), caught between the German and Russian giants. For the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark and other Scandinavian states (not to mention Greece), evidence of the “economic temptation” of Germany and the multiple ties with the UK⁴⁵ can be found. WWII led them to become satellite States of Germany, through occupation or economic dependence, but also showed their ability to remain in British favour.

When China is not compared with imperial Germany, it is compared with the United States of the 19th century. Despite a spectacular upsurge, this power intervened little in international affairs (if we overlook a very active Asian policy), rose “peacefully” (which conceals virtually permanent wars⁴⁶), and was particularly careful to keep external powers in the Western hemisphere at bay (the famous Monroe Doctrine) and dominating it. The German presence (and even ambitions) in Latin America

⁴¹ William A. Callahan, *China Dreams. 20 Visions of the Future*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2013, chapter 2.

⁴² Here we have the theory of “Eastphalia”: *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies*, 2012, No. 17(1).

⁴³ The comparison was hinted at without any real knowledge of the way the Chinese tributary system operates, by Pierre Melandri and Justin Vaisse, in *L’empire du Milieu. Les Etats-Unis et le monde depuis la fin de la guerre froide*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2001. For a more in-depth comparison (though the analogy is slightly exaggerated), Yuen Foong Khong, “The American Tributary System”, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2013, No. 6(1).

⁴⁴ Joon-Woo Park, Don Keyser and Gi-Wook Shin (eds.), *Asia’s Middle Powers. The Identity and Regional Policy of South Korea and Vietnam*, Washington DC, Brookings, 2013. On the interplay of the smaller states, John D. Ciorciari, *The Limits of Alignment. Southeast Asia and the Great Powers since 1975*, Washington DC, Georgetown University Press, 2010.

⁴⁵ Patrick Salmon, *Scandinavia and the Great Powers, 1890-1940*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, Nigel Ashton and Duco Hellema (eds.), *Unspoken Allies. Anglo-Dutch Relations since 1780*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2001, Jorgen Sevaldsen and Bo BJORKE (eds.) *Britain and Denmark: political, economic and cultural relations in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, Copenhagen, Museum Tusulanum Press, 2003.

⁴⁶ Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation. America and the World, 1600-1898*, New York, Atlantic Books, 2006.

even contributed to straining the relations between the US and Germany⁴⁷. The Chinese civil war and the Maoist period can be likened to the American civil war, and post-1978 China, just like post-1865 United States, prioritised the economy, with a rather protectionist approach and permissiveness toward trafficking. Likewise, China has developed a discourse on international harmony, and refuses to exercise leadership⁴⁸. We are, forgetting, however, the imperial dimensions of 19th century American history, and especially the missionary, philanthropic and prohibitionist activism of American “proto-NGOs”⁴⁹. China is thus suspected of wanting to establish a sort of “Monroe doctrine” for Asia, when this ambition is not considered natural according to the theory of offensive realism⁵⁰. The United States, as the European powers before them, fear “expulsion” from Asia. The spectre of a “yellow” anti-Western bloc is one of the aspects of the “Yellow Peril”. It was formed in the 1930s to 1950s, and reappeared at the beginning of the 1990s with the rise of Japan and the discourse on Asian values, the virtues of enlightened authoritarianism and the “re-centring of Asia” in the economic field. This resulted in a “come what may”-type analogy (“*après moi le deluge*”) of the “post-American” world. If we consider that the US protects regional balance and stability, its withdrawal would then lead to a more militarised, competitive and conflict-prone world. American involvement prevented post-1945 Europe from resembling the Europe of the first half of the century. A US withdrawal from Asia would make the latter similar to Europe before 1914. It seems that despite the end of the Cold War, China’s growing power and some forms of opposition and criticism, the “meta-structure” of American regional hegemony does subsist. It is considerably supported in the region, it is constantly renegotiated, and the costs (and risks) of its replacement would be too high. China has a part in the institutions that reinforce it⁵¹.

➤ PART II: COULD THE CAUSES OF WORLD WAR I BE REAPPEARING IN EAST ASIA?

I. STRUCTURAL CAUSES: RIVALRIES AND INSECURITIES

1. Imperial rivalries

Rivalries between great powers appear to be a major cause of World War I, but we should not overstate the impact of colonial competition. They did contribute to straining the atmosphere and increasing tensions between the great European powers. Colonial empires were considered an essential basis of power. Those that were deprived of it, or that had to content themselves with the

⁴⁷ For a recent comprehensive review of the considerable historiography on the German presence in Latin America, H. Glenn Penny, “Review Essay: Latin American Connections, Recent Work on German Interactions with Latin America”, *Central European History*, 2013, No. 46(3).

⁴⁸ Barry Buzan and Michael Cox, “China and the United States: Comparable Cases of ‘Peaceful Rise’?”, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2013, No. 6(2).

⁴⁹ On imperial dimensions, see the assessment by Paul Kramer, “Empire and connection: Imperial histories of the United States and the World”, *The American Historical Review*, December 2011; on redemptive imperialism, Ian Tyrell, *Reforming the World. The Creation of America’s Moral Empire*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010, Frank Ninkovich, *Global Dawn: The Cultural Foundations of American Internationalism, 1865-90*, Cambridge (Mass), Harvard University Press, 2009.

⁵⁰ John Mearsheimer, “The Gathering Storm: China’s Challenge to US Power in Asia”, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2010, No. 3(3).

⁵¹ Evelyn Goh, *The Struggle for Order. Hegemony, Hierarchy, and Transition in Post-Cold War East Asia*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2013.

smallest share (such as Germany) were thus frustrated and sought, at best, to impose themselves, or at worst, to find compensation in Europe itself (in the Eastern part). The transition from a European game to a global one, with a “new imperialism”, took place to the detriment of Germany. The appeasement of these rivalries by rapprochements – Franco-British in 1904 and Anglo-Russian in 1907 – had a strong impact on the European system⁵². In Asia, although it would be excessive to talk of a quadruple alliance⁵³, Germany was gradually isolated by the Franco-Anglo-Russian rapprochement, the Anglo-Japanese alliance of 1902 (initially directed against Russia), and the Russo-Japanese rapprochement which took place from 1907, little after the Russo-Japanese war – partly thanks to French mediation. There were also agreements between the Americans and the Japanese: the USA agreed to stop challenging Japanese domination in Korea, while Japan no longer disputed the United States’ control over the Philippines. Western powers did not only aim to isolate Germany, but also to control Japanese ambitions. However, colonial competition did not directly result in war, despite Franco-British and especially Anglo-Russian tensions. Outlying colonies even provided a source of relief for the military, a release from cities confronted with expanding populations and social tensions. It was also a means to transfer rivalries and violence far from Europe – even though the violence in Europe in the first half of the 20th century was probably a backlash from this colonial violence. Germany may have believed that British rapprochements with France and Russia could not last because of their colonial rivalries, and could not forge an alliance with the UK, as it might drag Germany into Britain’s colonial rivalries. Meanwhile, London feared being dragged into Germany’s European rivalries.

We should not forget that the UK was above all a world empire. The major rivalry of the 19th century was the Anglo-Russian rivalry, fighting over the remains of the great declining empires from the Mediterranean to the Pacific. On the brink of 1914, the Anglo-Russian rapprochement of 1907 was in jeopardy because of widespread tensions over that area, and the inevitable war seemed to be the clash between these two great Empires⁵⁴. Some British historians (as Keith Wilson) even consider that Britain entered the war in order to keep an eye on Russia (or even France) if it emerged victorious. Moreover, Russia had its attention focused on the Ottoman Empire and Persia, and wanted to take advantage of the war to carry through with old ambitions and put an end to the subversion of its “South”, which it ascribed to those countries⁵⁵. It is believed that London’s aim was also to maintain good relations with Russia, essential to British interests in Asia. The British dilemma was to have a Russia powerful enough to contain the German threat, but weak enough not to jeopardise the British Empire⁵⁶. The worst outcome would be a German-Russian alliance, which would give Russia freedom of action, while the UK would be confined to Europe. This very nightmare occurred after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, when Russia became subordinate to Germany and stopped fighting the Ottoman Empire. During a few months, until 1918, London feared for its Asian empire. French and German historians’ focusing on events taking place in the Rhineland

⁵² Paul W. Schroeder, “International politics, peace and war, 1815-1914”, In: T.C.W. Blanning (ed.), *Short Oxford History of Europe. The Nineteenth Century*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 188sq.

⁵³ A theory developed by John Albert White: *Transition to Global Rivalry. Alliance Diplomacy and the Quadruple Alliance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

⁵⁴ Jennifer Siegel. *Endgame. Britain, Russia, and the Final Struggle for Central Asia*, London: IB Tauris, 2002.

⁵⁵ Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War*, Cambridge (Mass.), Belknap Press, 2011, Michael A. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires. The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908-1918*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

⁵⁶ Keith Neilson, *Britain and the Last Tsar. British Policy and Russia, 1894-1917*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995.

neglected to see this “bigger picture”. American-Soviet rivalry succeeded the Anglo-Russian rivalry over the same areas. The period of détente in the 1970s was linked to Sino-Soviet tensions, and the end of the Cold War was partly due to the rising power of East Asia. Might tomorrow bring a strong Russo-American rapprochement, to face an increasingly powerful China and keep an eye on Russian politics in the Middle-East – Russia fearing once more the destabilisation of its South due to the spread of jihadism? Russia struggles to have influence in Asia, other than accepting to continually sell more energy and sophisticated weapons to China, while the Russian Far East and Central Asia seem to constitute the two horizons of the Chinese expansion⁵⁷. This has not prevented China and Russia from creating a credible impression of an anti-American alliance for the past several years, nor observers from fantasising about a new Sino-Russian bloc that would destabilize the democratic West almost as much as the German-Soviet alliance.

The quest for colonies is no longer relevant in the modern world, having given way to a system of clientelism. Countries can no longer deal with urban density by spilling over into their colonial backyards – and Asian countries have all entered the second phase of their demographic transition. The exponential need for raw materials, especially energy, is a cause for concern. The most alarmist predictions talk of a global struggle to access this wealth, which would heighten rivalries. The UK and Germany were once great producers of coal, and energy never became scarce. The situation is more similar to WWII, when Germany and Japan, confronted with the well-equipped United States and British Empire, considered that they had to obtain resources they did not possess (especially agricultural and oil resources) to wage a total war. We can easily imagine increasing tensions for access to minerals in Africa, between China and India for instance; or a battle for oil in the Middle-East, if the US considers that China seeks to control it, whereas since 1945 and especially the Carter Doctrine of 1980, America has vouched to protect its free movement (while becoming less and less dependent on it over the years). The Asian States maintain a Statist, mercantilist approach to these issues⁵⁸. We can even see the outlines of a security dilemma beginning to form. China is more and more dependent on imported oil, from the Middle-East in particular. In the meantime, American domination of the seas makes it possible to disrupt or even impede flows towards China. The latter thus seeks to protect its access to oil through the development of its navy. The United States considers this buildup of the Chinese navy as a provocation⁵⁹. Not only were coal and iron at the heart of France and Germany’s military power, but the period from 1870 to 1945 can be seen as a huge Franco-German battle, with significant territorial challenges, to control the steel industry of north-western Europe, in the bilingual space between Belgium and Northern Italy, fought over since the Treaty of Verdun of 843. Through the creation of ECSC, Europe made this conflictual issue one that would be shared by all its Member States. Among Asian countries, tensions over maritime boundaries, disputed islands, and resources in Chinese maritime areas led to multiple forms of cooperative management. However, the ECSC was born in a particular context: Germany had been defeated, it was essential to rebuild a war-devastated Europe, people wanted to put the competitiveness of World War II behind them, the Americans encouraged European integration, and the Soviet threat caused concern. Besides, there are not enough resources in the seas bordering

⁵⁷ Stephen Blank, “Toward a New China Order in Asia: Russia’s Failure”, NBR Special Report, Mars 2011 and “The Context of Russo-Chinese Military Relations”, *American Foreign Policy Interest*, 2013, No. 35(5).

⁵⁸ Christopher M. Dent, “Understanding the Energy Diplomacies of East Asian States”, *Modern Asian Studies*, December 2012.

⁵⁹ Charles L. Glaser, “How Oil Influences US National Security”, *International Security*, Autumn 2013.

China to make them the core of a similar cooperation-reconciliation process with Japan and States of South-East Asia.

2. *The security dilemma for Germany and China*

Which analogies could we draw on the potential areas where China could expand (even peacefully) in Asia? Korea can be likened to Belgium: Tokyo traditionally considers the former a dagger pointed to Japan, if it is united and in the hands of a hostile power (Russia, at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries); the latter could not be occupied by a power hostile to England, so as not to risk an invasion. To the United States, Central Asia is similar to Eastern Europe for the UK; that is, a remote and little-known region, which does not initially appear to be of vital interest. Besides, as in 1914, Russia is the country immediately concerned. However, it represents a base for the reinforcement of the enemy's power. While the blockade of China⁶⁰ is a topic of debate in the American strategic discussion, recalling the British strategy towards imperial Germany, China seems to be turning to Russia and Central Asia to create a safe "hydrocarbon highway"⁶¹, the same way Nazi Germany, learning from the past, tried to take advantage of resources in the East through an alliance with Romania and the Soviet Union, then by aggressively taking control of Ukraine and the Caucasus. Lastly, South-East Asia may be compared to the Balkans. Beyond the patronage issues and the weakness of State constructions, this region became central to US interests at the end of the 1930s, and especially after 1941. Though it is good form to consider that the US had no real interest in Vietnam and overestimated a potential domino-effect of the Communist expansion, the memory of the consequences of the blistering advance of Japan after 1940, which threatened Australia, India and the Middle-East, remained strong. In the 1960s, South-East Asia was a cornucopia of resources and a potential market for Japan. Chinese domination in the region would put Japan in jeopardy and threaten essential maritime traffic lanes. Likewise, German-Austrian (or Russian) domination of the Balkans threatened British traffic in the Mediterranean, and thus the well-known "route to India". Singapore could be the Americans' Greece. Lastly, much has been written on the Sino-Indian rivalry in South-East Asia, in particular on the issue of control of the Indian Ocean. In reality, in the 1960s to 1970s, South-East Asia was similar to the Balkans, with clashes between States; today, it creates institutions and endeavours to "socialise" great powers. Although Serbia is again considered the rogue State responsible for World War I⁶², which is due to the Serbian wars of the 1990s and the nostalgic rehabilitation of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and of multiethnic empires generally⁶³, North Korea could take on this role in the Asia of the future, and trigger an escalation – or even the Philippines, excessively provoking the Chinese in the China Sea.

Comparison between present-day China and Germany of 1914 is little convincing in terms of situation, but a little more in terms of process. United Germany had become the focus in the European continent further to brilliant military victories from 1864 to 1871. Some States had territorial claims towards Germany, especially France, which had lost Alsace-Lorraine. Bismarckian Germany was a satisfied power in Europe, at the heart of diplomatic alignments, and seeking to

⁶⁰ Sean Mirski, "Stranglehold: The Context, Conduct and Consequences of an American Naval Blockade of China", *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2013, No. 36(3).

⁶¹ Rosemary A. Kelanic, "China's Changing Oil Calculus", *The National Interest on line*, November 12, 2013.

⁶² Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalker: How Europe went to war in 1914*, 2013.

⁶³ See "Résurgences impériales", *Sciences Humaines*, Special Edition, November-December 2013.

isolate France or keep it away from the Rhine through colonial ventures. China certainly emerged victorious from WWII, was able to reinstate its domination over some territories, such as in the west, and put an end to unequal treaties. But China also had territorial claims: to bring Taiwan back under Chinese control, recover certain islands still under Japanese control, establish its sovereignty on the South China Sea for good, and even one day revisit the issue of the independence of Outer Mongolia, imposed by Russia. It was completely isolated in the 1960s and now has cross-border disputes with most of its neighbours.

The “central position” of Germany was considered a major geopolitical liability, resulting in the fear of encirclement and invasion. China has twenty neighbours and has been rather accommodating in the past twenty years to negotiate its borders⁶⁴. Comparable to Germany before 1914, it may feel fettered between India, Russia, Japan, and above all the United States. All attempts at an assertive policy, such as those attempted since 2009, tend to backfire, as they spark concern⁶⁵. This benefits the US, although Beijing does not explicitly try to provoke crises to break regional alignments, as Berlin did. In a way, it did attempt to do so in September of 1954 during the Quemoy and Matsu crisis. However, whereas the goal was to prevent the signature of a treaty between the US and the Republic of China, the crisis accelerated its signature⁶⁶. During the Moroccan crises of 1905-1906 and 1911, Germany wanted to widen the gap between Paris and London, but it brought them closer. In Asia, China might come to face the same issue as Germany in Europe: too strong for regional balance, but too weak to dominate the continent. Nevertheless, a major difference with Germany (and with China from the 1840s to the 1940s) is that China does not need to fear a joint offensive from powerful neighbours: it seems rather hard to imagine a mass arrival of troops of the old powers (Japan and Russia), India (although its population of combat age now exceeds China’s) or even the United States (which had great difficulty with Iraq and Afghanistan alone). China has never been so secure at its borders.

II. THE CONSEQUENCES OF POWER POLITICS

1. Inflexible alliances

One of the major “lessons” from WWI is that tight alliances turn a localised conflict into a generalised war (the “chain gang” effect). Germany may well have started a sort of preventive war because it saw Anglo-Franco-Russian relationships becoming closer, and Russia launching arming programmes that would allow it to have greater impact in a war against Germany⁶⁷. However, the “chain gang” analogy may not be entirely apt, as alliances before 1914 were usually forged to moderate and control the allies rather than lead them to war⁶⁸. They were probably not as binding as is generally believed. In 1913-1914, the United Kingdom started to fear the Russian power again,

⁶⁴ Bruce A. Elleman, Stephen Kotkin and Clive Schofield (eds.), *Beijing’s Power and China’s Borders. Twenty Neighbors in Asia*, Armonk, M.E. Sharpe, 2013.

⁶⁵ On the exaggeration of this “new assertiveness” by commentators: Alastair Iain Johnston, “How New and Assertive Is China’s New Assertiveness?”, *International Security*, Spring 2013.

⁶⁶ Lastly, Hsia-Ting Lin, “The US-Taiwan Military Diplomacy Revisited: Chiang Kai-shek, *Baituan*, and the 1954 Mutual Defence Pact”, *Diplomatic History*, Summer 2013.

⁶⁷ Samuel Williamson Jr, “German Perceptions of the Triple Entente after 1911. Their Mounting Apprehensions Reconsidered”, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 2011, No. 7(2).

⁶⁸ Tierney, “Does Chain Gang Cause the Outbreak of War?”, *International Studies Quarterly*, 2011, No. 55(2), William Mulligan, *The Origins of the First World War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

especially as Nicolas II had ordered the Duma to undertake a significant effort in shipbuilding⁶⁹, and there were a few signs of openness toward Germany. Détente was even on the horizon⁷⁰. However, during the 1914 crisis, “the fear of abandonment” prevailed over “the fear of entrapment”. Not supporting the ally was considered too risky⁷¹, while France spent more time making sure that the UK would indeed enter the war than seeking a peaceful solution to the crisis. In the previous years, the French had tried to “lead the English” into a war on the continent, and the military relationship between France and Great Britain, growing increasingly close, was the product of a mutual desire, evidenced in the growing exchanges of men and experiences⁷². Nevertheless, on the eve of the war, British “Continental Commitment” was still far from guaranteed, especially as the perspective of a continental war seemed to fade, and colonial issues appeared more urgent. There was no certainty that a British Expeditionary Force would arrive quickly on the continent. In no way did these military rapprochements force the hand of the London Cabinet during the crisis of summer 1914⁷³. In a way, alliances were not binding enough because all feared rapprochements between their allies and enemies: France, a rapprochement between London and Berlin or Saint-Petersburg and Berlin; and London could not be sure that there would not be a Franco-German rapprochement one day.

“The fear of entrapment” long marked American bilateral alliances in Asia. It was essential to ensure that Taiwan and South Korea would not engage in risky ventures to unify their countries⁷⁴. Japan feared being led into American wars in Asia. Washington and Tokyo are today negotiating possible ways to employ the American forces based in the archipelago in the event of another war in Korea. “The fear of abandonment” justified the Americans, for the sake of credibility, went to war with Vietnam: they could not afford to have their allies doubt them. Japan was concerned after Nixon’s surprise visit to China, and the same worry was felt by the US’ allies in South East Asia, after the US abandoned Vietnam to its fate. Today, there is talk of an alleged loss of credibility towards the US because of its attitude to the Syrian crisis and its allies’ concerns (Israel and Saudi Arabia in particular) because of their apparent desire to change their relationships with Iran. Beyond the “rebalancing” discourse, some of the US’ partners may have doubts about their reliability. However, American alliances are more binding than those of the Entente Cordiale at the beginning of the 20th century, which tends to be considered a source of deterrence and stability.

⁶⁹ Tony E. Demchak, “Rebuilding the Russian Fleet: The Duma and Naval Rearmament, 1907-1914”, *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 2013, No. 26(1).

⁷⁰ According to William Mulligan, this ended in the middle of 1913, but for T.C. Otte, it continued: “Detente 1914: Sir William Tyrrell’s Secret Mission to Germany”, *The Historical Journal*, March 2013. Also, Friedrich Kissling, “Unfought Wars. The Effect of Detente before World War I”, In: Holger Hafflerbach and David Stevenson (eds.), *An Improbable War, op. cit.*

⁷¹ This raises credibility questions in terms of international relations. Jonathan Mercer (*Reputation and International Politics*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1996) endeavoured to show that the extent of this perception was often exaggerated. Using the crises of the beginning of the century as examples (but not the 1913-1914 period, unfortunately), Gregory D. Miller countered his theory: *The Shadow of the Past. Reputation and Military Alliances before the First World War*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2012.

⁷² William J. Phillpott, “The Making of the Military Entente, 1904-1914: France, The British Army, and the Prospect of War”, *English Historical Review*, October 2013.

⁷³ T.G. Otte, “The Method in which we were schooled by experience”: British Strategy and a Continental Commitment before 1914”, In: Keith Neilson and Greg Kennedy (eds.) *The British Way of Warfare. Power and the International System, 1856-1956*, London, Ashgate, 2010.

⁷⁴ Victor D. Cha, “Powerplay. Origins of the U.S. Alliance System in Asia”, *International Security*, Winter 2009/2010.

Today however, there are few formal alliances with Asia. A small number have been signed between the US AND Japan and South Korea. China has none, apart from a longstanding, strong tie with Pakistan in the Indian subcontinent, and a difficult relationship with North Korea. Another scenario resembles 1914: a weakened North Korea engaging in a war against South Korea, leading to the intervention of the US and China. Nevertheless, North Korea is not as significant to Beijing as Austria-Hungary was to Berlin, and South Korea is not Serbia. Though some hoped for a stable bipolar structure in Asia⁷⁵ – a likeness of the bipolarity of the 1950s' (which was hardly stable, but preferable to the US to the increase of competitive enemies in the region in the 1960s and 1970s⁷⁶), most observers show there is no anti-China balancing in Asia. This does not necessarily mean that the future of Asia must be a traditional and Sino-centred one, no more than 19th century Europe⁷⁷. Vietnam could be a part of this balancing logic, but it is hard to imagine it would form a proper alliance with the US – although the Franco-Russian alliance was made in the 1890s between a republican France and an autocratic Russia, while Napoleon had invaded Russia and the Tsar's troops had been as far as Paris. India and Indonesia are democracies, but Washington expects little from them as they have an old tradition of non-alignment⁷⁸. The race for free trade bilateral treaties, the signing between Beijing and Tokyo of free-trade treaties with ASEAN, or the TPP that the Americans are struggling to negotiate (which must include Latin-American States and does not exclude China, though it probably does not meet the participation criteria) have nothing in common with forms of alliance. The potential entry of Taiwan in the TPP⁷⁹ could not be compared to the alliance of December 1954, officially abandoned in 1979.

2. *The security dilemma*

Another aspect of power politics, often put forward to explain the outbreak of World War I, is the arms race. Quantitative studies have not successfully proven whether arms races trigger conflicts. Before 1914, they were a source of tension, but did not make war inevitable. Much of the focus was on the naval arms race between the UK and Germany, but it lost momentum in 1912. It was rather the land arms race, between Germany on one side, and France and Russia on the other, that "militarised" diplomacy and crises (with States increasingly resorting to ultimatums and partial mobilisation), caused the greatest concern, and increased the tendency to take risks. Those that seemed to face difficulties (Germany lacked a tax base, while Austria-Hungary could not compete against the other great powers) started the war. In 1913-14, the race seemed slow, and those who sought financial equilibrium pushed for more sensible practices. Though the arms race made war more likely, it did not make it inevitable⁸⁰.

⁷⁵ Robert Ross, "The Geography of Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-First Century", *International Security*, Spring 1999.

⁷⁶ Thomas J. Christensen, *Worse than a Monolith. Alliance Politics and Problems of Coercive Diplomacy in Asia*, Princeton, Princeton university Press, 2011.

⁷⁷ David Kang, "Getting Asia Wrong. The Need for New Analytical Frameworks", *International Security*, Spring 2003 (and the comment of Amitav Acharya, "Will Asia's Past Be Its Future?", *International Security*, Winter 2003/2004), David Kang, "Paper Tiger. Why isn't the rest afraid of China?" *Foreign Policy op. ed.*, April 25, 2013

⁷⁸ Ted Osius, "Global Swing States: Deepening Partnerships with India and Indonesia", *Asia Policy*, January 2014

⁷⁹ Richard Bush and Joshua Meltzer, "Taiwan and the Trans-Pacific Partnership: Preparing the Way", The Brookings Institution Center for East Asia Policy Studies, October 2013.

⁸⁰ David Stevenson, "Militarization and Diplomacy in Europe before 1914", *International Security*, Summer 1997 and "Was a Peaceful Outcome Thinkable? The European Land Armaments Race before 1914", In: Holger Hafflerbach and David Stevenson (eds.), *An Improbable War, op. cit.*

Nonetheless, Asia is cautiously watching for a potential security dilemma. Several small States are modernising their equipment through costly purchases. The Americans are monitoring not only the Chinese naval effort, but also the possibility of an Indo-Chinese maritime rivalry. Japan is indeed restrained by its Constitution, and since 1970 China can rest assured in the belief that the American alliance limits its neighbour's armament efforts. However, the question of the revision of article 9 is frequently raised; the US is tempted by the notion of "sharing the burden" of the defence of the archipelago (and of South Korea, which is sometimes reproached for being more concerned about Japan than about the North Korean threat). The North Korean nuclear threat may justify specific efforts in Japan and South Korea, and even closer cooperation between these two countries and the US. The latter is concerned about the rapid increase in Chinese military spending – which is following the double-figure growth of the GNP, without needing an excessive effort from Beijing – and also the modernisation of the Chinese nuclear arsenal, which had long remained minimal⁸¹. Overall, in the Asian states, military spending as a percentage of GNP has slightly decreased with the end of the cold war (especially in South Korea and Taiwan), but growing prosperity and technological progress may mechanically increase military investments, while nuclear proliferation and the interplay of nuclear multipolarity casts a shadow on stability in the region⁸².

3. *Inflexible war plans and the ideology of the offensive*

Lastly, other military dimensions have also been mentioned. On the one hand, the existence of binding war plans is believed to have restricted civilian decision-makers. This lack of flexibility seems however to have been exaggerated: plans were constantly evolving, and the Austrian Chief of Staff multiplied the number of war plans against various enemies – Italy, Serbia, Romania or Russia⁸³. Even the well-known Schlieffen plan, which would have required Germany to wage war against France as quickly as possible to defeat it and turn then against Russia, does not seem to have been as strict as generally believed (one historian even went further, declaring it simply did not exist)⁸⁴. It is

⁸¹ On the past, M. Taylor Fravel and Evan S. Medeiros, "China's Search for Assured Retaliation. The Evolution of Chinese Nuclear Strategy and Force Structure", *International Security*, Autumn 2010, Jonathan Holslag, "China's Deterrence Paradox", in Harsh V. Pant (ed.), *Handbook of Nuclear Proliferation*, New York, Routledge, 2012. For modernisation, Thomas J. Christensen, "The Meaning of the Nuclear Evolution: China's Strategic Modernization and US-China Security relations", *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, August 2012, Michael S. Chase, "China's transition to a More Credible Nuclear Deterrent: Implications and Challenges for the United States Strategy", *Asia Policy*, July 2013, Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "Chinese Nuclear Forces, 2013", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 2013, No. 69(6).

⁸² Ashley Tellis & alii (ed.), *Asia in the Second Nuclear Age. Strategic Asia 2013-2014*, National Bureau of Asian Research, 2013.

⁸³ Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig (eds.), *War Planning 1914*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

⁸⁴ This historian is Terence Zuber. In the 2000s, his theory was cause for much debate, especially in the journal *War in History*: although it was criticised at first by multiple professional historians, it sowed the seeds of doubt among several of them. See also the conclusions drawn from this new approach by Keir A. Lieber, "The New History of World War I and What It Means for International Relations Theory", *International Security*, Autumn 2007.

consequently harder to credit the theory, as was the case in the 1960s, that leaders, especially the Germans, were dragged into the relentless rationales of military planning and that their choices were limited⁸⁵. In fact, the emphasis on this unstoppable spiral linked to the inflexibility of war plans was related to the fear during the Cold War that the two great powers could be dragged despite themselves into an exchange of nuclear fire.

Moreover, the “cult of the offensive” would appear to have severely limited diplomatic options. In the 1980s, the Americans turned to more offensive military strategies against the Soviet Union, and rediscovered German military traditions (partly through Israel, who emerged victorious from the Six-Day War while the US got bogged down in Vietnam). This resulted in a clamour of disapproval, with many pointing out the risks involved in choosing these strategies, recalling the origins of WWI⁸⁶. This strategy was tested twice on land, not in the plains of central Europe, but in Iraq. At sea and in the air, the desire to prevent the Soviet forces from emerging from their hideout in the Baltic Sea and in the Sea of Okhotsk can be seen today in the scenarios of a war against China, and the Americans are annoyed by the alleged intention of China to lead an Anti-Access/Area Denial strategy (and to obtain the military resources to make it possible) that would annihilate this ambition. Ancient Chinese military traditions are examined, and lessons drawn by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) from the conflicts it engaged in, and from wars conducted by the US⁸⁷, are studied. There does not seem to be any propensity for the Prussian strategy, and conventional conflicts led by China were limited (against India in 1965, the Soviet Union in 1969 and Vietnam in 1979). Lastly, it is more and more common to wonder about the level of civilian control over the Chinese Army, as well as the PLA’s role in China’s more assertive conduct. This brings us to the demonstrations that in authoritarian States (Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia), the military (and even militarist) ethos played an overly- determining role in certain choices, while high-ranking officers had an important role in the decision-making process in July 1914 – although it is excessive to consider that they imposed their choices. German militarism, the “German way of waging war”, and the German culture of war are held responsible⁸⁸.

On the other hand, offensive war plans do not necessarily signify offensive intentions, although the risks are higher. The “cult of the offensive” was not exclusive to the eve of WWI. Fortification systems were built according to what were considered strategic priorities– Italy for Austria-Hungary, the Rhine for Germany. It was only from 1912 onwards that the Germans began to fortify their eastern border. The question may be raised as to why they decided to start a war in July 1914 rather than wait until the fortification was completed, which would have facilitated the defence of the

⁸⁵ Holger H. Herwig, “Military Doomsday Machine”? The Decision for War 1914”, *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, Summer 2011.

⁸⁶ Stephen Van Evera, “The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War”, *International Security*, Summer 1984, Jack N. Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1984; and critique by Scott D. Sagan, “1914 Revisited: Allies, Offensive and Instability”, *International Security*, Autumn 1986 and Marc Trachtenberg.

⁸⁷ I.e. Andrew Scobell, *China’s Use of Military Force. Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, Andrew Scobell, David Lai and Roy Kamphausen (eds.), *Chinese Lessons from Other People’s Wars*, Strategic Studies Institute 2011: <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdf/PUB1090.pdf>

⁸⁸ Kevin Cramer, “Review Essay: A World of Enemies: New Perspectives on German Military Culture and the Origins of the First World War”, *Central European History*, 2006, No. 39(2).

country⁸⁹. The apparent defensive strategy may however appear unsettling as it enables a shielded offensive. This criticism is expressed by China and Russia in response to the plans and installations of missile defence systems, in Japan and South Korea. It raises a question for potential “cyberwars”: isn’t an offensive the best defence?

III. STRUCTURAL CAUSES: THE ROLE OF NATIONALISMS, INTERNAL LOGIC AND THE “SPIRIT OF 1914”

1. *An inevitable clash between nationalisms?*

The First World War often appears as the inevitable outcome of a clash of nationalisms. In a successful work based on a somewhat uncertain historic base, Thérèse Delpech insists, for example, on the “1905 turning point”, that historians approach with a lot more precaution⁹⁰. Chinese nationalism is being closely watched and analysed like nationalism was in imperial Germany, both from the “top down” (how power manipulates nationalism to transcend internal divides or temporary problems to strengthen its legitimacy) and the “bottom up” (the rallying of the middle classes and young people, primarily, by associations and the media). The convergence of State nationalism and populist nationalism, along with a heightened sensitivity to “public opinion”, are both an advantage and a constraint for Chinese diplomacy⁹¹. Similarly, in Japan, the Abe government is accused (mainly due to his family’s past) of playing the nationalist card. But there is also, for example, the nationalist pressure from Tokyo’s mayor Shintaro Ishihara, who purported to buy the Senkaku Islands, forcing the government to declare that they belong to the nation; from then, China no longer believes the Americans to be controlling their ally, as they were supposed to do since the 1970s. Nationalism could be exploited by the Chinese leaders if economic growth, an ideological substitute for communism, began to wane, or if internal debates began to develop. This internal “*Primat der Innenpolitik*” reasoning of the march to war (a sort of diversion war) was particularly studied in the 1970s for Germany and Russia, although it is not entirely convincing⁹².

The impact of nationalisms requires further explanation. Firstly, the Balkan wars that raged in the years 1912-1913 were seen with a critical eye from Europe, and compared to a continent where such violence could not exist – which admittedly was not great foresight. Secondly, the multinational empires were in no way finished, and recent historiography shows that very few leaders of “nationalities” envisaged their fall. Overall, the military mobilization of 1914 was executed smoothly. Thirdly, and most importantly, beyond rediscovering forms of internationalism and transnational solidarity (linked to the climate of the time and new agendas in the history of international relations), it would seem that on the eve of war, aggressive nationalism was in the minority and the people

⁸⁹ David Stevenson, “Fortifications and the European Military Balance before 1914”, *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, December 2012.

⁹⁰ Thérèse Delpech, *L’ensauvagement. Le retour de la barbarie au XXI^e siècle*, Paris, Grasset, 2005, “Y a-t-il des tournants historiques? 1905 et le nationalisme”, *Mil neuf cent. Revue d’histoire intellectuelle*, 2001, No.19.

⁹¹ Suisheng Zhao, “Foreign Policy Implications of Chinese Revisionism Revisited: the strident turn”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2013, No.22(82).

⁹² James Joll and Gordon Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 3rd edition, London, Pearson, 2007, Chapter 5; in their excellent review of recent advances, Samuel R. Williamson and Ernest R. May, “An Identity of Opinion: Historians and July 1914”, *The Journal of Modern History*, June 2007 focus primarily on this issue.

went to war out of patriotism (because each government could affirm that it was leading a defensive war), but without enthusiasm, contrary to a persistent myth⁹³.

2. The “spirit of 1914”

If, as is often said, war begins in the minds of men, we must turn our focus to the “spirit of 1914”⁹⁴, i.e. the ideologies, mindsets, as well as the emotions (a field of analysis that is rapidly developing) of the people, groups, ruling circles and men. For decades, we have pored over the ideas of the beginning of the century to find the signs of catastrophes to come. Beyond the revolutionary groups and “pre-fascist” notions, it would seem that a number of leaders, in particular in Germany and Austria, had a social-Darwinian view of the world⁹⁵. They anticipated a war between Germans and Slavs, justified by the concept of strengthening nations and races and allowing the strongest to conquer. This ideological substrate, which posits in particular that war is unavoidable (even if this *topos* was highly exaggerated, as it was not very popular or dominant⁹⁶), has not disappeared – especially if transposed in the struggle between “Whites” and “Yellows” – but it cannot occur as it did in the previous century. However, the vision of a constant battle between powers can fuel an explosive blend of optimism (China has plenty of time, as it is an old country unlike the United States) and pessimism (the inevitability of Chinese glory is hampered by the United States, or Japan who attempted to overturn the Asian hierarchy from the 19th century on). Debate continues over whether Germany was too confident of her *Sonderweg* and her military capacities⁹⁷, or if she was encircled, pessimistic and fearful of a double attack.

Alongside the emergence of these “modern” discourses, in the past thirty years we have rediscovered how traditional and mostly aristocratic European societies remained. Issues of honour and status (for individuals as well as for States) were of great importance. Similarly, masculinity was a key aspect: the German Chancellor in 1914 refused the “self-castration of Germany”. War was a way to “re-masculinise” societies weakened by modern life and urbanisation⁹⁸. However, the rising powers did not want for gender-related discourse: China, in 1949, went from being “penetrated” to standing tall. Sino-American rivalry may turn into a masculinity contest, while Putin employs metaphors and demonstrations of virility – he who might consider to have done for Russia what Mao did for China in 1949. In Asia, however, it is above all a question of appearances, and the interminable battles over history and in school textbooks largely reflect these symbolic practices.

⁹³ Since Jean-Jacques Becker produced his seminal theory, *1914. Comment les Français sont partis en guerre*, Paris, Presses de la FNSP, 1977, multiple studies have appeared in Germany and England that go against this storybook image. For example, Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914. Militarism, Myth, and Mobilization in Germany*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

⁹⁴ James Joll and Gordon Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, op. cit. Chapter 8.

⁹⁵ Thomas Lindemann, *Les doctrines darwiniennes et la guerre de 1914*, Paris, Economica, 2001.

⁹⁶ Holger Afflerbach, “The Topos of Improbable War in Europe before 1914”, In: Holger Hafflerbach and David Stevenson (eds.), *An Improbable War? Op. cit.*

⁹⁷ Mark Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes of the First World War*, London, Berg, 2004, Robert Foley, “German Assessments of France before the Great War”, *The Journal of Intelligence History*, Winter 2005.

⁹⁸ Avner Offer, “Going to War in 1914: A Matter of Honor?”, *Politics & Society*, June 1995, Ute Frevert, “Honor, Gender and Power. The Politics of Satisfaction in pre-War Europe”, In: Holger Hafflerbach and David Stevenson (eds.), *An Improbable War? op. cit.*, Richard Ned Lebow, *Why Nations Fight. Past and Future Motives for War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, Margaret MacMillan, *The War That Ended Peace The Road to 1914*, New York, Random House, 2013.

The issue of political models is also pertinent. British, French and soon Americans insisted, from the moment they joined the war, on the major difference between their political systems and that of Germany, denouncing the “militarist caste” in power, to the point of talking about a crusade. At the same time, Germany boasted of its political and cultural uniqueness. Before the war, however, Germany had often been admired and there were no major ideological divides in Europe that influenced foreign policy. That communist countries of Asia appear to be examples is questionable. The ideological differences, other than certain “Asianist” discourses, are significant. There was no pariah state seeking provocation like North Korea in 1914, and the country most criticized for “human rights” issues, Russia, was an ally of the two countries most attached to freedoms, France and the United Kingdom. In Sino-Japanese relations, China may put history to one side, and Japan human rights issues, but the ideological differences remain: China is a socialist, anti-imperialist and “sinocentrist” State, whereas Japan is occasionally tempted by concepts such as the “arc of freedom and prosperity”. But at the beginning of the 20th and 21st centuries, the issue of risks arising in the democratization phase, as incomplete as it may be, has been raised in relation to the risk of war. Nationalism can be used for mobilization and legitimization in political battles hardened by the lack of a culture of democracy. Imperial and Nazi Germany was proof that the growth of the middle classes is not a guarantee of democratization; they can even sometimes turn to extremist ideologies. Nevertheless, recent historiography suggests that war was not inevitable and responsibility lies with those who were in power during the crisis of July 1914⁹⁹.

Studying the underlying forces remains important in order to understand the nature of the First World War. However, it is debatable to consider that this build-up of gunpowder necessarily resulted in an explosion. Certainly, at a certain point a catalyst convergence of factors made war possible¹⁰⁰. What is more, the Sarajevo attack is no longer seen as a minor event. We can indeed consider that without the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, there would not have been a war¹⁰¹. For this reason, the majority of scenarios involving a China-America or Asian war are based on local events, in particular in Taiwan and Korea (which is lodged between four great powers, like the Balkans surrounded by Austria-Hungary, Russia, Italy and the United Kingdom from the Mediterranean) or on incidents that put a strain on relations between Washington and Beijing¹⁰². However, if we tread lightly around the fuse, it is the inflammatory decision-makers who are put under the microscope. It was their choices – made in summer 1914, in a context that was not headed for war – that released the potential force that had built up. These cliques made up of a handful of individuals are therefore considered to be responsible for the disaster of 1914¹⁰³. This conclusion does not discredit previous approaches, and it should not be considered as the definitive answer to a

⁹⁹ On these salient conclusions, Heather Jones, “Historiographical Review. As the Centenary Approaches: The Regeneration of First World War Historiography”, *The Historical Journal*, 2013, No.56(3).

¹⁰⁰ Richard Ned Lebow, “Contingency, Catalysts, and International System Change”, *Political Science Quarterly*, 115(4), 2000-01.

¹⁰¹ Richard Ned Lebow, *Forbidden Fruit. Counterfactuals and International Relations*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010, chapter 3 and *Archduke Franz Ferdinand Lives! A World Without World War I*, New York, MacMillan, publication date set for autumn 2014.

¹⁰² David P. Rapkin and William R. Thompson, *Transition Scenarios. China and the United States in the Twenty-First Century*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013, which gives a rundown of publications anticipating this transition.

¹⁰³ Holger H. Herwig, “‘Military Doomsday Machine’?”... op.cit., Michael S. Neiberg, *Dance of the Furies. Europe and the Outbreak of World War One*, Cambridge, Belknap Press, 2011, Christopher Clark, *Les Somnambules...* op. cit., Margaret MacMillan, *The War That Ended Peace* op. cit.

question that will remain long after the centenary of the war. It is undoubtedly the result of a different relationship to war in general in western societies, but perhaps also of the feeling that the Bush administration made Americans believe in a war of necessity when in the end it was mostly a war of choice. This comes down to a small set of decision makers and the influence of neoconservatives with an aggressive, preaching vision of international relations. It also appears as a warning for the leaders who, like those of 1914, want to play with the fire of nationalisms, militarism, ambitions of domination and who would spark a new apocalyptic cycle.

➤ CONCLUSION: WHAT FAILED TO PREVENT THE WAR IN 1914 AND COULD PREVENT WAR TODAY

Current historiography has evolved in the questions posed about World War I's causes. Instead of listing the factors that led to war, it is now common to study why the mechanisms or forces that had previously prevented the outbreak of a global war did not work in 1914. On the one hand, this reasoning can be applied to emerging reflection (especially in Scandinavian countries, connected with the Peace Research Institute) on the causes of the "Asian peace" which has lasted since 1979 (the lack of war between States after a long century of dreadful wars)¹⁰⁴, and on the other, to "liberal" and "constructivist" approaches that are contradictory to the pessimism of "realists".

To the disciples of "capitalist peace", "soft trade" and the virtues of the "first modernisation", the outbreak of WWI – shortly after Norman Angell had explained that European powers could not go against their own interests /by fighting each other – remains a thorn in their side. True, free trade was in crisis, customs wars increased, and States' interests were sometimes closely linked to those of big businesses. Secondly, economic interdependence was not accompanied by cooperative rapprochements between States for economic purposes, with "European" projects solely emerging during the war¹⁰⁵. Thirdly, war started where economic interdependence was the weakest, in eastern and south-eastern Europe¹⁰⁶. Lastly, the City was opposed to the war. The fact remains that we could "draw" the lesson that economic competition between states does not disappear with trade, investment, and diverse forms of integration, and that war does not only occur in periods of crisis and "deglobalising" seclusion of economic blocs. Therefore, we may easily declare that economic interdependence would not prevent a Sino-Japanese or Sino-American war, or even

¹⁰⁴ Stein Tonnesson, "What Is It That Best explains the East Asian Peace since 1979? A Call for a Research Agenda", *Asian Perspective*, 2009, No. 33(1), Tima Kivimäki, "Democracy and War in East Asia", *Pacific Focus*, December 2012, Mikael Weissmann, *The East Asian Peace. Conflict Prevention and Informal Peacebuilding*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2012. For an opposing view, Hugh White, "Why War in Asia Remains Thinkable", *Survival*, December 2008-January 2009.

¹⁰⁵ David Stevenson, "The First World War and European Integration", *The International History Review*, 2012, No. 34(4).

¹⁰⁶ Eric Gartzke and Yonatan Lupu, "Trading on Preconceptions. Why World War I Was Not a Failure of Economic Interdependence", *International Security*, spring 2012.

that present-day economic globalisation – just like globalisation at the turn of the last century – can whet appetites for war and increase tensions.

If “capitalist peace” did not work, forms of governance through an entente between the great powers did not prevent the crisis of the summer of 1914. This can be explained, among others, by the fact that the British were only half-heartedly supportive of it, and because Berlin and Vienna did not want it. Yet during the Balkan wars of 1912-13, this unofficial mechanism still had its merit. However, it began a marked decline, especially because of the upsurge of nationalisms, the “1914 spirit” – often contradictory to the aristocratic and middle-class values that nurture it – and because of the backlash caused by the imperialist diplomacy of absolute gain that had taken root in Europe¹⁰⁷. Even the family relationships among the European courts were caught up in the nationalist divides, while remaining subject to individual passions and rivalries (in particular over Wilhelm II)¹⁰⁸. Britain and France are thus accused of being unaware that they pushed Germany and Austria-Hungary to war (which, for the latter, was pointless and virtually suicidal)¹⁰⁹, for lack of an attempt to delicately maintain the balance and practice “appeasing recognition” of a frustrated Germany¹¹⁰. Austria-Hungary would have benefited most from upholding the entente, but it disapproved of it. In Asia, the ASEAN is undoubtedly in a similar situation; however, its aim is not to endure the rule of an entente among the great powers, but to foster ASEAN influence in the region. Despite all the hopes pinned on its capability to “socialise” the great regional powers through flexible norms, and despite the increasing number of forums, groups, and structures, it seems to no longer serve any purpose¹¹¹. Behind the Brownian movement of experts, bureaucrats and leaders, the foundations of the American system remain, while China and Japan compete to impede the other from ruling on its own or laying the foundations of an organisation. Few institutions exist that cater to North-Eastern Asia, and the “Six Party Talks” on Korea was not very productive in terms of solutions. In South-East Asia, territorial issues in the South China Sea are not handled jointly – China preferring bilateral relationships. All in all, there is no certainty that the fabric of institutions and organisations in Asia will withstand strong international tensions.

We may confirm that the small circle of leaders that made the decisions during the summer of 1914 could not have predicted the future, i.e. a four-year, full-scale and particularly deadly world war. They were undoubtedly under the illusion that it would be a short war. Even the British hoped, beyond a German Trafalgar, for a fast economic war that would make Berlin surrender¹¹². Nevertheless, the study of the conflicts of the century’s first years had shown that the risk of a long

¹⁰⁷ Georges-Henri Soutou, *L’Europe de 1815 à nos jours*, Paris, PUF, 2007, chapter 5, Paul W. Schroeder, “International politics, peace and war...”, op; cit.

¹⁰⁸ Jonathan Paulmann, “Searching for the “Royal International”: The Mechanics of Monarchical Relations in Nineteenth-Century Europe”, In: Martin H. Geyer and Johannes Paulmann (eds.), *The Mechanics of Internationalism*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, Roderick McLean. *Royalty and Diplomacy in Europe, 1890-1914*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.

¹⁰⁹ Paul W. Schroeder, “Embedded Counterfactuals and World War I as an Unavoidable War”, in: *Systems, Stability and Statecraft. Essays on the International History of Modern Europe*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2005 and “Stealing Horses to Great Applause: Austria-Hungary’s Decision in 1914 in Systemic Perspective”, In: Holger Hafflerbach and David Stevenson (eds.), *An Improbable War? op. cit.*

¹¹⁰ Thomas Lindemann, *Penser la guerre. L’apport constructiviste*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2008, p. 98-113.

¹¹¹ Mark Beeson, “Living with Giants. ASEAN and the Evolution of Asian Regionalism”, *TRANS: Trans-Regional and –National Studies of Southeast Asia*, July 2013.

¹¹² Nicholas A. Lambert, *Planning Armageddon: British Economic Warfare and the First World War*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2012.

and deadly war real. Various German leaders suspected that the war would not be short, but they feared that a long war would compel them to mobilise the whole population, thus democratising the political system¹¹³. However, beyond nuclear deterrence, refinements and the complexity of more widespread dissuasion, the use of the atomic weapon in 1945 may generate self-dissuasion. Between the Korean War – during which the Americans ignored Beijing’s signals by going past the 38th parallel – and the Vietnam War – during which the Chinese were more explicit on the tolerable limits for provocation – the lessons to be drawn could limit the expansion of conflicts¹¹⁴. The Russians, perhaps fearing the modernisation of the Chinese nuclear arsenal, seem interested in a form of old-fashioned trilateral “arms control”, with Washington and Beijing¹¹⁵.

This study will take the most recent historiography of the causes of WWI and compare them with the prospective reflection (and sometimes assertions) on the future of Asia and especially the potential consequences of China’s rise, with greater emphasis on the former rather than the latter. First of all, hypotheses on the hegemonic war will be compared with historical realities. The root and immediate causes, which are put forward to explain the progression towards war, will then be gathered. The goal will be to understand if they have an effect on present-day and future Asia. The conclusion will look at the factors that seem to go against the idea of an “inevitable” war in Asia, then come back to a historiography of WWI which moves away from a determinist questioning and now looks at the ways to avoid war that were not successful in 1914.

¹¹³ Holger H. Herwig, “Germany and the ‘Short War’ Illusion: Toward a New Interpretation?” *The Journal of Military History*, July 2002.

¹¹⁴ Lorenz Lüthi, “Reading and Warning the Likely Enemy – a Commentary: Signaling Across Four Continents”, *The International History Review*, 2013, No. 35(4).

¹¹⁵ Alexei Abartov and Vladimir Dvorkin, *The Great Strategic Triangle*, Carnegie Moscow Center, April 2013, Robert Ayson, “Arms control in Asia: yesterday’s concept for today’s region”, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 2013, No. 67(1).

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