

World War I: A warning from history

By Elisa Barwick

Today's increasing schedule of alliances from the newly minted AUKUS (Australia, UK, USA) to the recently revived "Quad" (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue comprising the USA, Australia, Japan and India) is eerily reminiscent of the jostling over agreements, alliances and ententes associated with the build up to World War I. This approach, rather than trying to find common ground, is what locked in war.

Also reminiscent of that period is the talk of "great power competition" and the fight for "freedom of the seas" in response to China's supposed

"aggressive" actions in the South China Sea. (Upon transiting the Taiwan Strait for the ninth time this year, the US Seventh Fleet declared in a 17 September press release: "The ship's transit through the Taiwan Strait demonstrates the US commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific. The United States military flies, sails, and operates anywhere international law allows.")

In his seminal work covering the first half of the 19th century, *Tragedy and Hope: A history of the world in our time*, American historian Carrol Quigley describes the course of events leading into the first World War. By 1871, the unification of Germany by Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, followed by a period of rapid economic growth, had ended the balance of power in Europe that had existed for over 250 years. Bismarck was pursuing the American System of Political Economy, brought to the country by German-American economist Friedrich List, a follower of America's first Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton, who introduced national banking to fund industrial development. With this approach threatening to spread across the continent, including proposals for a Eurasian rail system linking continental Western Europe to China, Bismarck was ousted in 1890 and was succeeded by a series of vacillating puppet chancellors.¹

Germany upgraded its naval power over 1900-05, particularly aimed at Britain and an emerging anti-German coalition. This was done, Quigley reports, "in the hope that it would bring England to the conference table, and without any real intention of using it in a war with England"; however, "the Germans were not able to grasp the opportunity when it occurred". By 1907, "The Powers of Europe became divided into two antagonistic coalitions, and a series of crises began which led, step by step, to the catastrophe of 1914."

A series of agreements, alliances and ententes sprung up, evolved and solidified into irreconcilable extremes. Germany fashioned the Triple Alliance (1871-90), with Austria and Italy, following a failed effort at an alliance with Russia and France. Left isolated, Russia and France



Coverage of the sinking of British merchant vessel RMS *Lusitania* served to drum up American support for the war. Photo: screenshot

moved into the Dual Alliance, which with the intervention of Britain would be transformed into the Triple Entente. "[A]ncient Anglo-French enmity was toned down in the face of the rising power of Germany", wrote Quigley; Anglo-Russian rivalry, which came to a head with the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway, completed in 1904, was also put aside. There were at least a dozen efforts to bridge the gap between the two factions, right up until war broke out, resulting in numerous agreements, including over contentious areas such as the Balkans.

Those efforts failing, regions of the world were divided into "zones of influence" of either of the two factions, rather than nations in their own right. A series of crises in 1905-14 included conflicts in Morocco and Bosnia, the Italo-Turkish War, the First and Second Balkan Wars and the Albanian Crisis. An atmosphere of nervous exhaustion had developed and the world was on the brink by the time of the 28 June 1914 assassination of the heir to the Habsburg throne, Archduke Francis Ferdinand, in the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo. When Austria launched a counterattack on Serbia one month later World War had begun.

US entry into the war

"The most important diplomatic event of the latter part of the First World War was the intervention of the United States on the side of the Entente Powers in April 1917", wrote Quigley. Among the key reasons were that "The German submarine attacks on neutral shipping made it necessary for the United States to go to war to secure 'freedom of the seas'".

The USA under President Woodrow Wilson (1913-21) felt it could not allow Britain to be defeated by any other power, nor allow control of the seas, then dominated by Britain, to pass to an unfriendly power. But German submarines were driving Britain to the brink of starvation by sinking its merchant ships. The following excerpt from Quigley's Chapter 5, "The First World War, 1914-1918" tells the story of what ensued and the eventual American decision to join the war effort:

1. "The Ouster of Bismarck and The Start of World War I", Jeffrey Steinberg, *EIR* magazine, 12 June 2015

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“The fact that the German submarines were acting in retaliation for the illegal British blockade of the continent of Europe and British violations of international law and neutral rights on the high seas, the fact that the Anglo-Saxon heritage of the United States and the Anglophilism of its influential classes made it impossible for the average American to see world events except through the spectacles made by British propaganda; the fact that Americans had lent the Entente billions of dollars which would be jeopardised by a German victory, the fact that the enormous Entente purchases of war materiel had created a boom of prosperity and inflation which would collapse the very day that the Entente collapsed—all these factors were able to bring weight to bear on the American decision only because the balance-of-power issue laid a foundation on which they could work. The important fact was that Britain was close to defeat in April 1917, and on that basis the United States entered the war. The unconscious assumption by American leaders that an Entente victory was both necessary and inevitable was at the bottom of their failure to enforce the same rules of neutrality and international law against Britain as against Germany. They constantly assumed that British violations of these rules would be compensated with monetary damages, while German violations of these rules must be resisted, by force if necessary. Since they could not admit this unconscious assumption or publicly defend the legitimate basis of international power politics on which it rested, they finally went to war on an excuse which was legally weak, although emotionally satisfying. As John Bassett Moore, America’s most famous international lawyer, put it, ‘What most decisively contributed to the involvement of the United States in the war was the assertion of a right to protect belligerent ships on which Americans saw fit to travel and the treatment of armed belligerent merchantmen as peaceful vessels. Both assumptions were contrary to reason and to settled law, and no other professed neutral advanced them.’

“The Germans at first tried to use the established rules of international law regarding destruction of merchant vessels. This proved so dangerous, because of the peculiar character of the submarine itself, British control of the high seas, the British instructions to merchant ships to attack submarines, and the difficulty of distinguishing between British ships and neutral ships, that most German submarines tended to attack without warning. America protests reached a peak when the *Lusitania* was sunk in this way nine miles off the English coast on 7 May 1915. The *Lusitania* was a British merchant vessel ‘constructed with Government funds as [an] auxiliary cruiser, ... expressly included in the navy list published by the British Admiralty’, with ‘bases laid for mounting guns of six-inch calibre’, carrying a cargo of 2,400 cases of rifle cartridges and 1,250 cases of shrapnel, and with orders to attack German submarines whenever possible. Seven hundred and eighty-five of 1,257 passengers, including 128 of 197 Americans, lost their lives. The incompetence of the acting captain contributed to the heavy loss, as did also a mysterious ‘second explosion’ after the German torpedo struck. The vessel, which had been declared ‘unsinkable’, went down in eighteen minutes. The captain was on a course he had orders to avoid; he was running at reduced speed; he had an inexperienced crew; the portholes had been left open; the lifeboats had not been swung out; and no lifeboat drills had been held.

“The propaganda agencies of the Entente Powers made full use of the occasion. The *Times of London* announced that ‘four-fifths of her passengers were citizens of the United

States’ (the actual proportion was 15.6 per cent); the British manufactured and distributed a medal which they pretended had been awarded to the submarine crew by the German government; a French paper published a picture of the crowds in Berlin at the outbreak of war in 1914 as a picture of Germans ‘rejoicing’ at news of the sinking of the *Lusitania*.

“The United States protested violently against the submarine warfare while brushing aside German arguments based on the British blockade. It was so irreconcilable in these protests that Germany sent Wilson a note on 4 May 1916 in which it promised that ‘in the future merchant vessels within and without the war zone shall not be sunk without warning and without safeguarding human lives, unless these ships attempt to escape or offer resistance.’ In return the German government hoped that the United States would put pressure on Britain to follow the established rules of international law in regard to blockade and freedom of the sea. Wilson refused to do so. Accordingly, it became clear to the Germans that they would be starved into defeat unless they could defeat Britain first by unrestricted submarine warfare. Since they were aware that resort to this method would probably bring the United States into the war against them, they made another effort to negotiate peace before resorting to it. When their offer to negotiate, made on 12 December 1916, was rejected by Entente Powers on 27 December, the group in the German government which had been advocating ruthless submarine warfare came into a position to control affairs, and ordered the resumption of unrestricted submarine attacks on 1 February 1917. Wilson was notified of this decision on 31 January. He broke off diplomatic relations with Germany on 3 February, and, after two months of indecision, asked the Congress for a declaration of war 3 April 1917. The final decision was influenced by the constant pressure of his closest associates, the realisation that Britain was reaching the end of her resources of men, money, and ships, and the knowledge that Germany was planning to seek an alliance with Mexico, if war began.

“While the diplomacy of neutrality and intervention was moving along the lines we have described, a parallel diplomatic effort was being directed towards efforts to negotiate peace. These efforts were a failure but are, nonetheless, of considerable significance because they reveal the motivations and war aims of the belligerents. They were a failure because any negotiated peace requires a willingness on both sides to make those concessions which will permit the continued survival of the enemy. In 1914-18, however, in order to win public support for total mobilisation, each country’s propaganda had been directed towards a total victory for itself and total defeat for the enemy. In time, both sides became so enmeshed in their own propaganda that it became impossible to admit publicly one’s readiness to accept such lesser aims as any negotiated peace would require. Moreover, as the tide of battle waxed and waned, giving alternate periods of elation and discouragement to both sides, the side which was temporarily elated became increasingly attached to the fetish of total victory and unwilling to accept the lesser aim of a negotiated peace. Accordingly, peace became possible only when war weariness had reached the point where one side concluded that even defeat was preferable to continuation of the war. This point was reached in Russia in 1917 and in Germany and Austria in 1918. In Germany this point of view was greatly reinforced by the realisation that military defeat and political change were preferable to the economic revolution and social upheaval which would accompany any effort to continue the war in pursuit of an increasingly unattainable victory.”