

As tensions in Asia mount, danger of world war emerges

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It is somewhat remarkable that on the eve of the centenary of the outbreak of World War I in August 1914, the prospect of the eruption of a third world war, arising from the tensions generated by the conflicts between the US, Japan and China, is increasingly being raised in ruling circles and in media commentary.

The latest example is a piece by *Financial Times* economics correspondent Martin Wolf, published on Wednesday.

Wolf begins his article, titled “China must not copy the Kaiser’s errors,” as follows: “Will we sustain an open global economy while also managing tensions between a rising autocracy and democracies in relative economic decline? That was the question posed by the arrival of imperial Germany as Europe’s leading economic and military power in the late 19th century. It is the question posed today by the rise of communist China. Now, as then, mistrust is high and rising. Now, as then, actions of the rising power raise risks of conflict. We know how this story ended in 1914. How will the new one end, a century later?”

Pointing to the rising tensions in the East China Sea, Wolf recalls that World War I was also preceded by a series of conflicts—disputes between France and Germany over the status of Morocco in North Africa among them—and notes that seemingly minor events, in this case the clash over the disputed uninhabited islands (called Senkaku by Japan and Diaoyu by China), “can quickly escalate to catastrophic consequences.”

The risk of a ruinous conflict again exists but it is far from inevitable, Wolf reassures his readers, and may not be likely. However “it is not impossible and it is more likely than it was a month ago.”

Wolf is a steadfast defender of the capitalist order. Its market and profit system is conceived by him as the highest and therefore the only possible form of social

and economic organisation. Therefore he seeks to deflect attention from the fact that the “war to end all wars” in 1914 arose from the contradictions of the capitalist system itself.

Following the well-worn path of all the defenders of British imperialism, Wolf ascribes the origins of World War I to the actions of Germany. The “Kaiser’s errors,” he maintains, were that Germany sought to disrupt the alliance between Britain and France. China, therefore, should not make the same mistake by trying to come between the United States and Japan.

To buttress his argument, Wolf cites the book by the English liberal, Norman Angell, in which he claimed that war would prove fruitless, even for the victors, and therefore should not be pursued. Nevertheless war came, with all its devastating consequences.

Wolf maintains that if only these lessons of history are learned war can be averted.

The purpose of such assertions is to cover over the fact that World War I did not break out because Germany ignored the prescriptions of English liberals not to challenge the British Empire. The conflagration was generated by the expansion of the capitalist system and the conflicts it necessarily generated between the rival great powers.

In 1907, a leading official in the British Foreign Office, working under the direction of Foreign Secretary Lord Grey, produced a memorandum in which he explained that the question of whether Germany’s intentions were militaristic or peaceful was, in the final analysis, irrelevant. The growth of German economic power, in and of itself, he explained, would be a threat to the British Empire and so it was necessary to prepare for war.

In a rare moment of candour during a debate on budget estimates for the British navy in the lead-up to

the war, Winston Churchill pointed to these antagonisms: “We have got all we want in territory, and our claim to be left in enjoyment of vast and splendid possessions, mainly acquired by violence, largely maintained by force, often seems less reasonable to others than to us.”

The present situation is not entirely analogous to that which prevailed before the outbreak of World War I.

China, unlike Germany, is not an imperialist power, but operates within a global economic and political structure dominated by the US and its allies. But the unprecedented economic expansion that has resulted from China’s role as the cheap labour platform for global corporations is leading to disruptions in the geo-political framework presided over by the US.

In China’s worldwide drive for access to raw materials, and in the economic and political alliances it forges with other countries to ensure their continuous supply, China comes into conflict with the geo-strategic and economic interests of US imperialism.

This is not the result of some expansionist intent on the part of the Chinese regime, but arises out of the very logic of its capitalist development. The Chinese capitalist oligarchy, increasingly fearful of the vastly expanded Chinese working class, seeks to maintain economic growth as the basis for its continued rule.

This rapid growth, especially after 2001, when China was admitted to the World Trade Organization, led to a strategic reorientation by the US, carried out by the Obama administration—the so-called “pivot” or “rebalancing” to Asia directed against China.

The central demand of the US is that China abide by the international “rules” of conduct—“rules” that are based on the political and economic interests of the US—in every region of the world. This includes recognition by China of the unfettered right of the American military to conduct operations in the waters and air space directly off its coast. Such operations involve preparations for a full-scale military attack on the Chinese mainland should the US deem that necessary.

There is another important parallel to the pre-1914 situation. As Leon Trotsky noted, the major downturn in the world economy in 1913 had a significant impact on the already existing political tensions. It was not so much that the war brought an end to economic growth, but that the downturn brought “competition to its

intensest pitch,” leading to a situation where capitalist countries sought to “eliminate each other from the market ... by mechanical means.”

Five years after the eruption of the global financial crisis in 2008, the world economy is experiencing ever lower growth, with investment, one of the key indicators of capitalist expansion, at record lows.

Once again, all the contradictions of the capitalist system that produced World War I and the devastating consequences that followed are gathering with explosive force.

The international working class must intervene to confront the crisis of the imperialist system and growing danger of war it poses on the basis of its own program—the fight for world socialist revolution and the overthrow of the decaying capitalist profit and nation-state system.



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