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The danger of war in Asia

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Two recent commentaries highlight the growing nervousness in ruling circles internationally about the danger of a new world war erupting in Asia. Both point to the region's extremely tense maritime disputes, especially between China and Japan, and draw parallels with the build-up of competing interests and alliances that led inexorably to the eruption of World War I in 1914.

In an article entitled "A Maritime Balkans of the 21st Century?" in the *Foreign Policy* journal on January 30, former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd declared: "There are no ordinary times in East Asia. With tensions rising from conflicting territorial claims in the East China and South China seas, the region increasingly resembles a 21st century maritime redux of the Balkans a century ago—a tinderbox on water. Nationalist sentiment is surging across the region, reducing the domestic political space for less confrontation approaches... In security terms, the region is more brittle than at any time since the fall of Saigon in 1975."

Writing in the *Financial Times* on February 4, commentator Gideon Rachman made the same point in his article, "The shadow of 1914 falls over the Pacific." He wrote: "The flickering black and white films of men going 'over the top' in the First World War seem impossibly distant. Yet the idea that the great powers of today could never again stumble into a war, as they did in 1914,

is far too complacent. The rising tensions between China, Japan and the US have echoes of the terrible conflict that broke out almost a century ago.”

The tone of the articles is not shrill. Neither writer believes that world war is imminent, but, in their sober assessments, neither do they rule it out. The most immediate flashpoint is the territorial dispute over the rocky outcrops in the East China Sea known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China. Since last September, when Tokyo “nationalised” the islets, increasingly dangerous manoeuvres by Chinese and Japanese vessels and aircraft in the disputed waters and airspace have raised the risk of an incident that could spark open conflict.

The dangers have been compounded following Japan’s election in December. As Rachman noted: “[T]he new Japanese cabinet is full of hard-line nationalists, who are more inclined to confront China.” In the latest episode, last week, Tokyo accused Chinese naval vessels of twice locking their weapons systems onto Japanese targets, sparking another round of caustic public denials and accusations.

Rudd and Rachman made no reference to the real causes of the rising geo-political tensions and the outpouring of nationalism, which lie in the deepening global economic breakdown. Above all, they cover up the role of the Obama administration and its “pivot to Asia” that has deliberately encouraged allies like Japan and the Philippines to more aggressively push their territorial claims against China. Washington is establishing a system of military alliances, bases and strategic partnerships throughout the region, including in Australia, India, South Korea and Japan, aimed against Beijing.

Long gone is the triumphalism in bourgeois circles about a new period of peace and prosperity following the collapse of the Soviet Union two decades ago. The end of the Cold War opened up all the old great power antagonisms and rivalries that are fuelling a new neo-colonial scramble for raw materials, markets and cheap labour across the globe. The most destabilising factor in world politics has been US imperialism, which has exploited its military superiority to launch one war after another in a desperate attempt to offset its economic decline.

Obama’s “pivot to Asia” is bound up with the transformation of the region, above all China, into a gigantic cheap labour platform for the world’s competing global corporations. Washington’s strategic push throughout Asia to undermine Chinese influence is bound up with its efforts to maintain its economic dominance by dictating trade terms via its Trans Pacific Partnership grouping.

Likening the world situation to 1914, Rachman wrote: “China now, like Germany 100 years ago, is a rising power that fears the established great power [the United States] is intent on blocking its ascent.” It is true that as it scours the globe for raw materials and markets, China, as did Germany, comes into conflict with the dominant powers, above all the US. Unlike Germany, however, China is not an imperialist power. Its massive imports of energy and minerals feed

huge manufacturing enterprises that are either owned by, or supply, global corporate giants. Despite its size, the Chinese economy is completely dependent on foreign investment, foreign technology and a world capitalist order dominated by American imperialism.

Rudd and Rachman both concluded their articles with the hope that rationality and shared economic interests would prevail over war. These hopes, however, were undercut by the comments, cited by Rachman, of Harvard professor Joseph Nye, who took part in a top-level US mission to Beijing and Tokyo in October. “We discussed the 1914 analogy among ourselves,” Nye explained. “I don’t think any of the parties wants war, but we warned both sides about miscommunications and accidents. Deterrence usually works among rational actors, but the major players in 1914 were also rational actors.”

Nye’s remarks point to the fact that war is not a matter of subjective intentions, but is driven by objective social and economic forces. Following 1914, the most far-sighted Marxist revolutionaries of the day—Lenin and Trotsky—concluded that the war signalled the breakdown of capitalism and the opening up a new epoch of wars and revolution—the epoch of imperialism. The outbreak of war also brought the Russian Revolution of October 1917 that established the first workers’ state and gave a mighty impetus to the struggles of the working class internationally.

Profound economic, technological and political changes have taken place over the past century, but the fundamental contradictions of capitalism remain: between world economy and the outmoded nation state system, and between socialised production and the subordination of all economic activity to private profit. The sole social force able to prevent the slide to world war and barbarism is the international working class, through the abolition of the profit system and the establishment of a world-planned socialist economy. That requires a thorough assimilation of the lessons of the strategic experiences of the working class in the 20th century—above all, of the protracted struggle of the international Trotskyist movement for the program of Marxism.