**WWI and America's Rise as a Superpower**

*By Hans Hoyng*

**America's rise to superpower status began with its 1917 entry into World War I. President Woodrow Wilson had grand visions for the peace that followed, but failed. The battle he started in the US between idealists and realists continues to this day.**

"Sarajevo, 21st-century version." This is how political scientist Anne-Marie Slaughter, the director of policy planning under former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, refers to what is currently brewing off the Chinese coast, where the territorial claims of several nations overlap.

The analogy to the period prior to the outbreak of World War I is striking. China, "the Germany of (that) time," as American historian Robert Kagan puts it, is the emergent world power still seeking to define its role within the global community. At the same time, China is staking its claim to natural resources, intimidating its neighbors and developing massive naval power to secure its trade routes.

In taking these steps, China could easily become a rival to another world power, the United States of America, which would assume the role once played by Great Britain in this historical comparison. Just as the United Kingdom did at the time, the United States is now building alliances with its rival's neighbors. And leaders in Beijing have responded to such attempts to encircle their country with a similar sense of outrage as that displayed by the German Reich.

The current crisis in the East China Sea illustrates once again that there are still lessons to be learned from World War I a century after it began and, upon closer inspection, that politicians on both sides are trying to avoid making the same mistakes. But the current crisis in East Asia diverges from the situation leading up to World War I in one important respect: There is currently no country able to assume the role once played by the United States, which, with its late entry into the war, decided its outcome and eventually outpaced both its winners and losers.

The US's entry into the war in 1917 marked the beginning of its path to becoming a world power. In fact, according to historian Herfried Münkler, this was precisely the goal of some politicians in Washington. Treasury Secretary William Gibbs McAdoo, a son-in-law of President Woodrow Wilson, was already forging plans to replace the pound sterling with the dollar as the foremost international reserve currency.

**The Nerve Center of the World**

But his father-in-law, a lawyer and political scientist, and America's only president to enter politics after serving as the president of a university, had no such prosaic intentions. Wilson, the descendent of Scottish Presbyterians and a staunch idealist, and yet down-to-earth and in many respects, such as his racism, a son of the South, wanted to save the world and end war once and for all.

He failed, of course, with peace lasting only 20 years after World War I. Nevertheless, American politicians today justify military intervention with the same arguments Wilson used to convince the country to put an end to its isolation and intervene in Europe.

But Wilson managed to draw America's attention back to Europe. For the next century, the old continent was more or less at the center of American policy. Only today -- under a president who, like Wilson, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and has a penchant for idealism and stirring speeches -- is Europe apparently sinking into the background once again as Washington responds to the allure of dynamic Asia.

Back then, though, Europe was the nerve center of the world. By the end of 1916, the war had claimed the lives of millions of soldiers, and the warring parties seemed incapable of bringing it to an end. Wilson no other option than to enter the conflict. On Jan. 22, 1917, he explained his ideas about peace to the US Senate. It was the duty of the United States, he said, to help build a structure for permanent peace.

Wilson argued that goal of the war had to be the establishment of "community power" and not a "balance of power," and to achieve "organized common peace" instead of "organized rivalries." In other words, only a "peace without victory" could bring the war in Europe to an end.

In his speech, Wilson staked out his position within the fundamental conflict that characterized American foreign policy at the time. On the one side were the "realists," who believed that America's most important task was to balance the interests of different countries to achieve the most stable equilibrium possible.

**Light into the Darkness**

The other side consisted of idealists; it was an approach which would later be named after Wilson himself. "Wilsonian foreign policy" is premised on the notion, established in the Puritan days of the founding fathers, that the United States should emulate the Biblical city on the hill, a role model for all other nations. The country has a mission to fulfill: that of bringing light into the darkness of bondage and dependency.

Wilson managed to win over a majority in Congress with his fiery speech. Senator Ben Tillman described it as "the most startling and noblest utterance that has fallen from human lips since the Declaration of Independence." The *New York Times* called it a "moral transformation" of American policy.

The Germans, who had not been opposed to the idea of peace talks until then, responded nine days later with the resumption of unlimited submarine warfare. When his private secretary, Joseph Tumulty, brought him the news, Wilson's face became pale, and he said: "This means war."

Wilson was inaugurated into his second term on March 5, 1917. The man who had not mentioned foreign policy at all in his inaugural address four years earlier now had only one subject on his mind: war. "We are provincials no longer," he assured his listeners, noting that the struggle for Europe had made the Americans "citizens of the world." Finally, less than a month later, he asked Congress to declare war on Germany. America, he said, was fighting to liberate the peoples of the world, including the Germans. And then he uttered a sentence that US presidents have used again and again to justify military intervention -- no one more clearly and with less credibility than George W. Bush on the eve of the Iraq invasion. "The world must be made safe for democracy," Wilson said.

After the Bolsheviks had overthrown the czarist regime in Russia, Wilson spoke of a war between democracy and the forces of absolutism. German historian Karl Dietrich Erdmann characterized 1917 as an "epochal year in world history." Washington's entry into the war and the October Revolution in Russia, Erdmann argues, ensured that Europe had lost its role as the principal player in world history.

But Wilson was surprised by the positive reception his speech received. "My message today was a message of death for our young men," he told his loyal secretary, Tumulty. "How strange it seems to applaud that." Then the president laid his head on the table and "sobbed as if he was a child," Tumulty reported.

**Hearts and Minds**

The German general staff had appraised American military strength as being somewhere "between Belgium and Portugal." It wasn't incorrect, but it failed to account for the speed with which the rising industrial power could unleash additional forces. Wilson initially mobilized the navy to counter the threat from German submarines. He was also able to confiscate 97 German and Austrian ships in US ports, which were then used to transport 40,000 soldiers to Europe. About two million more "doughboys" would follow by the fall of 1918.

Wilson made New York financier Bernard Baruch one of his top advisers. Baruch and his associates, recruited from the top ranks of industry, completed their tasks with breathtaking speed. The nominal economic output of the United States doubled between 1914 and 1918. German Field Marshall Paul von Hindenburg saw Baruch as the real victor over Germany.

Wilson also fought for the hearts and minds of his fellow Americans. To spread the "gospel of Americanism" to the last corners of the earth, the president set up what amounted to a globally active propaganda agency, the Committee for Public Information (CPI), headed by journalist George Creel. Two decades later, Nazi propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels was impressed by Creel's book, "How We Advertised America."

The Espionage Act of 1917 was less harmless. Only last year, it was dug up to justify the government's rigid position against disagreeable whistleblowers like Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden. The law gave the government far more powers than merely the ability to take foreign agents out of circulation. It gave the government the discretion to determine whether criticism of the war could be treated as high treason. Together with a later amendment, the Espionage Act of 1917 was a comprehensive attack on freedom of speech.

And Wilson, who had always supported liberal causes in domestic policy, took a ruthless approach to dissidents. Some 1,500 Americans were convicted of holding views that diverged from the government's war policy, including Eugene Debs, the presidential candidate of the Socialist Party. Wilson, the son of a minister, was extremely adept at hating. As David Lloyd George, Britain's wartime prime minister, would later say: "Wilson loved mankind but didn't like people."

**A Triumphant Visit to Europe**

Once a committed proponent of peace, Wilson had now become a prophet of war. At a rally in Baltimore, he called upon the troops to proceed with decisiveness and with "force, force to the utmost, force without stint or limit, the righteous and triumphant force which shall make right the law of the world and cast every selfish dominion down in the dust." He received the Nobel Peace Prize just two years later.

Although the British and the French implored the Americans to offset the losses in their own ranks with the fresh troops from overseas, the head of the American Expeditionary Forces, General John Pershing, insisted on keeping his army independent. He held back his soldiers until the early summer of 1918. Only after the last German offensives had exhausted themselves did the Americans intervene on a large scale, contributing decisively to pushing back the Germans.

In the 584 days of American involvement in the war, 116,516 American soldiers and sailors were killed, with about half dying in the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, while 204,002 were wounded and 3,350 remained missing.

When the new German government, under then Chancellor Maximilian von Baden, offered the American president a ceasefire in early October, Wilson felt like a victor whose task was to reorganize the European nations. "We saved the world, and I do not intend to let those Europeans forget it," he said.

These were big words, but Wilson had good reason for his self-confidence. The United States emerged from World War I as the leading industrial power of the early 20th century. No other country had as much experience in the mass production of goods. After introducing general conscription, the country had developed a strong military, one that suffered far fewer losses than the British, the French and the Germans.

**War to End All Wars**

Furthermore, the European victorious powers owed the United States about $10 billion. The exhausted Continent could not have survived without food shipments from the United States. German sociologist Max Weber wrote, somewhat clairvoyantly, that American global dominance was now "inevitable."

On Dec. 4, 1918, Wilson embarked on a triumphant voyage to Europe on board the *George Washington*. It was the first major European trip any American president ever took.

Wearing a bearskin coat, Wilson stood next to captain on the bridge and watched as he was cheered by people on passing ships. He was en route to Paris, where he and the other victorious powers planned to draft a document that was to guarantee one thing above all: The war, which had ended in the Nov. 11 ceasefire, was to become the "war to end all wars." This is how German historian Klaus Schwabe describes Wilson's dream: "Wilson was the first American president to place the United States, an emerging world power, in the service of a global order that replaced traditional, power-oriented rivalries with a sort of global domestic policy based on international law."

As a man who was promising freedom, self-determination and eternal peace, it was no surprise that he was welcomed and celebrated as a savior in Europe. Herbert Hoover, who would later become president and managed food exports to Europe under Wilson, wrote: "Woodrow Wilson had reached the zenith of intellectual and spiritual leadership of the whole world, never hitherto known in history."

His first stop was Paris. Edith Wilson, who was at her husband's side, as always, could hardly believe what she saw, noting: "Paris was wild with celebration. Every inch was covered with cheering, shouting humanity. The sidewalks, the buildings, even the stately horse-chestnut trees were peopled with men and boys perched like sparrows in their very tops. Roofs were filled, windows overflowed until one grew giddy trying to greet the bursts of welcome that came like the surging of untamed waters."

The loyal Hoover was equally enthusiastic, writing: "No such man of moral and political power and no such an evangel of peace had appeared since Christ preached the Sermon on the Mount. It was the star of Bethlehem rising again."

**'The God of Peace'**

The Wilsons' second stop was London. They had been warned that the British would undoubtedly behave with more reserve during the first official visit of an American president. Prime Minister Lloyd George viewed Wilson with some mistrust, rightfully assuming that this new power posed a greater threat to the future of the British Empire than the German Empire had ever done. Nevertheless, Wilson was greeted with as much applause in London as on the streets in Paris. Shortly after they had arrived in their rooms in Buckingham Palace, King George V and Queen Mary sent a message to the presidential couple that the crowd outside the palace had grown so large that they would have to make a joint appearance on the balcony.

Rome, stop three, was the apotheosis. The Wilsons were showered with white roses. Wilson's bodyguard, Secret Service agent Edmund Starling, wrote: "The reception in Rome exceeded anything I have ever seen in all my years of witnessing public demonstrations. The people literally hailed the President as a god -- the God of Peace."

Germany's hopes also rested on Wilson at the time. The conditions of a ceasefire were to be negotiated on the basis of Wilson's Fourteen Points, in which he hoped to achieve liberal principles within a global framework. All people were to have the right of self-determination. The plan included restrictions on arms for all of Europe. But for Wilson, the most important point was the creation of a League of Nations, a group equipped with full powers and designed to guarantee peace.

There were, of course, plenty of politicians who poked fun at Wilson's idealism. French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau scoffed: "God was satisfied with Ten Commandments. Wilson gives us fourteen." Former President Teddy Roosevelt, for his part, derided the League of Nations idea.

Others were less cynical. The young John Maynard Keynes, a member of the British negotiating delegation, wrote: "In addition to this moral influence the realities of power were in [Wilson's] hands." This is how the economist defined the new world order: "The American armies were at the height of their numbers, discipline, and equipment. Europe was in complete dependence on the food supplies of the United States; and financially she was even more absolutely at their mercy. Europe … already owed the United States more than she could pay."

**Wilson's Failure**

Wilson vehemently advocated the creation of the League of Nations. He noted with irritation that the British and the French were more intent on what they could demand from Germany. Wilson would even have been prepared to postpone the negotiations over new borders and reparations -- but not the talks on the League of Nations -- by a year until emotions had cooled down. "Our greatest error would be to give (Germany) powerful reasons for one day wishing to take revenge," Wilson warned. But he was unable to prevail, and the Germans soon felt betrayed by Wilson.

The British and the French agreed to the League of Nations, including its Article 10, which covered collective military aid for a member state under attack. The European victors had realized that this was the only way to secure the future support of the United States. But Wilson also made compromises in subsequent talks. Then, following an illness that was never diagnosed -- suppositions range from the flu to encephalitis to a series of small strokes -- the president's behavior changes. Once so predictable, Wilson now began giving his underlings confusing orders, and he complained that the furnishings of his Paris villa offended his sense of color. He had the staff rearrange the furniture until all pieces of one color were on one side of the room, while those of other colors were placed elsewhere.

Ultimately, Hoover's assessment was that Allies thought Wilson would agree to compromises on 13 points, to save the 14th -- the League of Nations.

And that is what happened. Wilson signed the Treaty of Versailles, despite his own reservations and external warnings that the pact contained the germ of the next war.

But Wilson's real defeat was yet to come. When he returned to Washington in early July 1919, following his third trip to Europe, he encountered a Congress in which Republicans held the majority in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. And these Republicans were about as well disposed to Wilson as their successors are to current Democratic President Barack Obama. To some degree, Republicans' reasons for opposing Wilson and Obama were similar.

**'Bitter Contempt'**

Because the United States, as a member of the League of Nations, would be expected to give up some of its sovereignty, the Senate rejected the entire Versailles treaty and the League of Nations. It was not until 1921 that the US signed a separate peace treaty with Germany. Wilson saw his life's work being destroyed. He felt no hostility toward the Republican senators, he said after leaving office, only "bitter contempt."

It is not uncommon for the US to reject international bodies that Washington does not clearly dominate. Conservative Americans regularly voice their resentment for the United Nations, which succeeded the League of Nations. And for the fundamentalist Christian right, which remains influential today, the UN is even a tool of Satan, one that he aims to use to attain global dominance.

Even alliances like NATO are inherently suspect. Conservatives like former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and former Vice President Dick Cheney would rather choose their allies themselves.

Ironically, the pair's most important subordinates at the time were neo-conservatives, who saw themselves as Wilson's intellectual heirs. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz saw the war against Iraq as a legitimate tool to bring democracy to the Middle East, a view comparable to Wilson's aim to export democracy to Germany and the Habsburg Empire.

And the idealists? Has the missionary tradition of American foreign policy achieved any successes 100 years after the failure of its founding father, Woodrow Wilson?

**Politically Valid**

It isn't an easy question to answer. On the one hand, the United States, thanks to Wilson, is still the leading global power, even if it has now amassed a similar amount of debt abroad as Great Britain did to the United States after the end of World War I.

In the post-Wilson years, the Republicans tried to isolate the country and safeguard it behind protective tariffs, a failed policy that ended in the Great Depression. The next Democratic president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, continued many of the ideals of the Wilson era and, during World War II, created the germ of the successor organization to the League of Nations, which at least occasionally manages to achieve some degree of success.

By contrast, former President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, as foreign policy realists, tried to take the tension out of the Cold War via détente with the Soviet Union.

But when the socialist dictatorships were toppled in Eastern Europe, many Americans saw it as proof that Wilson's ideals of freedom and self-determination haven't lost their political validity to this day. And perhaps Wolfowitz, Wilson's great-grandson, can even hope that he will be proved right in the distant future.