

# CHINA MAYBE GERMANY BUT THE UNITED STATES ISN'T GREAT BRITAIN

BY

GREGORY MITROVICH

Do we hear the echoes of World War I in East Asia? China's rise has many in the foreign policy community concerned over mounting parallels between 21st century China and the emergence of late 19th century Imperial Germany. Germany's rapid growth disrupted the global balance of power and turned what should have been a minor regional crisis into a world war. China's rise is considered equally unsettling—hence the ubiquitous World War I analogies. However, scholars have largely ignored the second aspect to this equation: is the strategic position of the United States today comparable to that of Great Britain in the decades leading to World War I? Is America, [as Lionel Gelber](#) once argued, “in Britain's place.” The answer is no, United States today enjoys a far more favorable international environment than did Great Britain, meaning that the threat of crisis escalation today is not nearly as grave as during the run-up to World War I.

[An eerie similarity does exist](#) between the stated ambitions of the current Chinese leadership and those of late 19th century Imperial Germany. Only a few years ago Chinese foreign policy followed the diktat of Deng Xiaoping of [“hiding strength and biding time”](#) to avoid antagonizing the United States. Today, China's leaders argue that the country is ready for that challenge and must [“strive for achievement”](#) if it is to return to its historic role as the world's global power— [the “China Dream.”](#) To achieve this ambitious goal, President Xi Jinping has pushed for more assertive military and economic policies including the modernization of the People's Liberation Army, the creation of artificial islands in order to control the South China Seas, and a rapid increase in China's navy that according to some estimates has [surpassed the United States in size](#). In the meantime, there are fears that the Chinese government is challenging liberal-international institutions by creating the [Asia Infrastructure and](#)

[Investment Bank](#) and the [One Belt, One Road Initiative](#), a \$1.3 trillion infrastructure project aimed at resurrecting the ancient Silk Road connecting Europe and Africa to China.

Under Kaiser Wilhelm II, Germany underwent a similar strategic transformation. Until 1890 German foreign policy lay in the careful hands of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck whose chief objective was to isolate France from Russia to prevent Germany from facing a war on two fronts. After Bismarck's retirement, the Kaiser turned to more ambitious advisors, in particular Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, who called for Germany to become a global power in its own right—"to find its place in the sun" according to [German Foreign Minister Bernhard von Bulow](#), a policy that came to be known as Weltpolitik. Germany launched an all-out empire building campaign. It vastly increased its global trade and international investments, embarked on controversial infrastructure projects, like the Berlin-Baghdad railway, established a colonial empire, and most famously challenged the British in a naval arms race that many historians believed paved the way for World War I. The unsettling similarities between Imperial Germany and China run deep enough that Professor John Mearsheimer argues that [a crisis between the U.S. and China is inevitable](#).

However, there is a long-ignored flip side to this equation: Is the strategic position of the United States in 2018 comparable to that of Great Britain in 1900? Do we see similar trends between the U.S. and Britain as we do with China and Germany that increase the risks of war? Surprisingly, the answer is no. It is a commonplace to argue that the United States inherited Great Britain's role in the world, the liberal hegemon employing its naval dominance to ensure the security of the world's oceans. However, these similarities are misleading, is little resemblance between the positions of the United States and Great Britain.

For centuries the chief responsibility of the Royal Navy was to prevent a cross-channel invasion. A new priority emerged in the mid-19th century—that of preventing economic collapse and mass starvation. Beginning in the 1840s Great Britain significantly liberalized its trading system by repealing the Corn Laws and reducing import tariffs. Flushed with cheaper food from America, Canada, and Australia forcing out of business Britain's indigenous food suppliers. According to the historian [Avner](#)

[Offer](#), by the late 19th century the British imported nearly two-thirds of their food supply. These imports were, in turn, paid by Britain's dominance in global trade—British firms operated half the world's trade ships—and by London's enormous capital investments around the world. Should an enemy disrupt this trade nexus, it could precipitate the collapse of the British economy and the starvation of the British people. It was the responsibility of the Royal Navy to ensure that this never came to pass.

It is through this apocalyptic prism that British leaders regarded the German threat: Great Britain could never accept a naval rival. Throughout the 19th century, the British invested heavily in maintaining the world's most powerful fleet. To protect its global trade and ensure its food supply, the British deployed squadrons in nearly all the world's oceans. Understandably the British remained hypersensitive to any challenge to their naval supremacy, holding firm to the two-power standard: that its fleet of capital ships be equal to the combined capital-ship strength of the world's second and third largest navies.

The undisputed dominance of the Royal Navy enabled Britain to enjoy “splendid isolation” from the world—meaning that it did not need to rely upon allies for its security. Of course, that also meant that Great Britain had no allies, just rivals, a situation that became dire by the last decade of the century. Ironically, the first blow did not come from Germany but from France and Russia who in 1894 formed the Dual Alliance to deter German aggression by ensuring a war on two fronts. Then the law of unintended consequences kicked in. The agreement not only worried the Germans, it caused panic within the British Admiralty who believed it the realization of their greatest fear: An alliance between the world's second and third largest navies, one that could challenge Britain's naval mastery. The next shock came in 1897 with the passing of Germany's Naval Law that called for a battleship fleet capable of challenging the Royal Navy, igniting a naval competition that, a decade later, led to the Dreadnought contest.

The British government responded by rapidly accelerating construction of its battleship fleet; it also came to the painful realization that there was no choice but to recall the overseas squadrons back to home waters, end Britain's “splendid isolation” by allying with Japan, and begin a rapprochement with the United States. By the early 1900s Great Britain's strategic position was deteriorating rapidly. Operating only a few hundred miles off Britain's shoreline were four rival fleets: the Russian Baltic Sea

fleet, now allied with the French Channel and Mediterranean fleets, and the rapidly expanding German North Sea fleet. Germany's naval expansion eventually convinced the British in 1907 to end its centuries-old rivalries with France and Russia and join the *Triple Entente* laying the foundation for the alliance that would defeat Germany. In the end, the razor-thin margin of error with which Great Britain lived ([and indeed Germany as well](#)) magnified great power tensions and played an essential part in the lead up to World War I. None of these conditions apply to the United States today.

America's continental size has made it self-sufficient in food, indeed a leading food exporter, and according to some [estimates](#), the U.S. is on the verge of energy self-sufficiency. These facts alone place the U.S. in a different strategic category than Great Britain, so much so that the concept of "naval dominance" and its potential "loss" have entirely different meanings for each country. The Royal Navy ensured that the British people could eat and the economy could function, loss of this dominance meant that during war Britain could be starved into surrender, as nearly happened in 1917. For the American navy, loss of dominance means restrictions in its area of movement, vital for the defense of U.S. allies but not life and death for the United States itself, signifying that the United States does not face the same tensions that forced Britain's hand a century before.

Another critical advantage is the system of alliances the United States created during the Cold War. These alliances China must factor into any strategic calculation. Supporting the American Seventh Fleet in East Asia is Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force comprising over 150 warships along as well as fifty warships from the Australian navy. Japan's enormous industrial strength gives it the ability to significantly increase the size of its fleet should it feel the need to do so. Until the eve of war, Britain had no such allies that could relieve its defense burdens.

Given the stakes, analysts must remain wary of underestimating the implications of China's rise—one that has already unsettled East Asia and whose influence is felt throughout the world. China will continue as America's principal rival both militarily and economically for the next few decades. However, we should also acknowledge the fundamental differences that exist between the road that led to World War I and the world as it is today.