

The year is 1902 and the location is London. A dozen or so of the brightest and most influential minds of the era are sitting down to dinner. Among the eclectic assembly are eminent academics, journalists, politicians and civil servants, including geographer Halford Mackinder, shadow foreign secretary Sir Edward Grey, novelist H. G. Wells and philosopher Bertrand Russell. That was the Coefficients dining club established by Sidney Webb the co-founder of the London School of Economics.

With such an esteemed membership, you might think that members would cherish the privilege. Most probably did, yet Bertrand Russell parted company with his colleagues after only one year. At issue was Edward Grey's advocacy of *Entente* with France and Russia. As Russell saw it; such a policy 'led straight to world war'. And although the substance of the subsequent 1904 Anglo-French and 1907 Anglo-Russian Ententes dealt with colonial issues beyond Europe, history bore out Russell's fears. Rather than constrain German ambitions, the resulting triple-entente reinforced perceptions of encirclement in Berlin and ultimately entangled the continent into cataclysm. In a twist of fate, it fell to Grey to make the case for war to Parliament in August 1914.

Fast forward a little over a century. The year is 2011 and the location is East Asia. Notwithstanding claims to the contrary, the United States and China are in strategic competition. For the moment at least, the competition is much less intense than with the Soviets during the Cold War. Like two cyclists riding abreast of each other in a race, the United States and China are each jostling to gain an advantage short of the point where the other breaks into a sprint. Yet despite restraint on both sides, a risky game with potentially dire consequences is developing.

As with much else, strategic developments between China and the United States are being shaped by ongoing turmoil in the world economy. Having largely escaped the global financial crisis, China has been displaying a newfound assertiveness—some would say recalcitrance—in its external dealings. Japan, Vietnam and South Korea have all felt the reassertion of the Middle Kingdom's power. Meanwhile the United States, hobbled by an ailing economy and shackled to growing debt, has had little choice but to limit its response to diplomatic maneuvering.

So what's at stake between the China and the United States? Not as much as some would have it. China shows no sign of becoming a revisionist power akin to the totalitarian regimes that blighted the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To the contrary, China is tightly integrated into the international system, and its respect for international norms is akin to that of the United States. But, as in the past, the emergence of new powers can lead to conflict in and of itself. Nationalism might again trump self-interest as it did in 1914.

In the latest move, the Obama administration pulled out all stops to reassure its allies and friends that America remains engaged in the Western Pacific. In late 2010 Obama

and Hillary Clinton crisscrossed Asia, between them visiting ten countries, including Australia, Japan, Korea, Vietnam and, critically, India.

The US attempt to circle the wagons in Asia is easy to understand. Geography and economics mean that the military balance in East Asia is steadily shifting in China's favour, and the promise of a new 'air-sea battle concept' to counter Chinese anti-access capabilities is looking less credible by the day. More importantly, China's interests in the region are intrinsically stronger than those of the United States. So if push comes to shove, China will take greater risks and bear higher costs than the Americans would countenance. With all this weighing against them, it's not surprising that the United States is trying to build an implicit coalition to constrain China's strategic options.

What's surprising, to me at least, is the almost unreserved delight with which US 'reassurance' has been met around the region—including here in Australia where US basing is being actively considered. The underlying assumption is simple enough; China's behaviour can be shaped by concerted hedging by the United States and its partners. Aside from the very real risk that this will shape China's behaviour in exactly the opposite direction to that intended, it arguably also increases the likelihood (and certainly the consequences) of conflict by creating an entangling web of alliances and implicit security partnerships.

Parallels between the situation today and the years preceding WWI should be apparent. In place of 'entente' we have a new term-of-art 'security partnership'. Call it what you like, if we continue to treat China like Germany in early 1900s, they are likely to fulfill our fears.

So what are the alternatives? H. G. Wells, who alone among the Coefficients agreed with Russell, wrote in the *Days of the Comet* (1906) of the Earth being engulfed in a gaseous cloud that makes everyone sensible. In the novel, this unleashes an orgy of free love and causes Germany and England to cease fighting a war. Absent such a miraculous event, the alternatives are to build a concert of powers or seek a grand bargain in East Asia. But either option would hinge on a substantial appeasement of Chinese interests—which would be anathema to the United States and its allies. Perhaps we should hope for a comet and get ready to abandon monogamy.

*Mark Thomson is an analyst at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute.*  
markthomson@aspi.org.au