

Facing the Dangers of 21st Century Great Power War

A Conference on the Centenary of World War I

Saturday, May 3, 2014 9 a.m.-5:30 p.m.

Assembly Hall, Judson Memorial Church, 229 Thompson St., Manhattan

A century ago, an assassination in Sarajevo triggered World War I, a war that killed or wounded tens of millions. World War I was only the beginning of three decades of great power competition and warfare that culminated in the development and use of the atomic bomb. As in 1914, we confront an era of militarized competition between rising and declining powers, intense disputes over territory and resources, arms racing, complex military alliances, rising nationalism, and religious tensions. The beginning of this century, like the last, also is defined by deepening economic interdependence and competition, revolutionary advances in communications, and the belief that great power war would end civilization as we know it, and is thus unthinkable. Yet from the Persian Gulf to the East China Sea there are more than enough wild cards to spark incidents that could spiral towards war.

All of this is occurring within an economic framework dominated by immense capitalist firms that have gained sufficient power in much of the world to write their own rules. And we are now facing another feature of the time that brought us world wars: intractable global economic crisis, with the actions essential to break the impasse thwarted by the extreme accumulation of wealth and power by elites determined to keep things as they are.

This conference will be held alongside the 2014 preparatory committee meeting for the 2015 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference. The clearest opportunity of the nuclear age to eliminate The Bomb—the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the superpower confrontation that had immense nuclear arsenals as a central feature—is behind us. Nuclear disarmament efforts have stalled. Complex new arms races are ramping up, combining powerful, accurate conventional weapons capable of global reach with missile defenses and a wide spectrum of electronic warfare. Nuclear weapons remain a catastrophic threat if warfare spirals beyond limits in a manner inconceivable at the outset—as it did in the great power wars of the last century. As former British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan put it, “We thought of air warfare in 1938 rather as people think of nuclear war today.”¹

This new round of arms racing comes at a time when familiar factors may combine with novel ones to heighten the potential for conflict. Ascendant powers are challenging those that long have been dominant in regions that have been key arenas of economic and geopolitical contention. The magnitude and pace of development of these new powers is unprecedented, and is occurring in the context of equally unprecedented effects flowing from limits to key resources and to the carrying capacity of planetary ecosystems.

At this conference, bearing in mind the catastrophic warfare of the first half of the last century, we will ask participants to consider the following questions: How significant is the risk

¹ H. MacMillan, *Winds of change, 1914-1939* (London: 1966), 575; quoted in Michael Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon* (New Haven: 1987), 74.

of great power war in the coming decades? What are the prospects for disarmament in a time of rising tension among great powers? What factors must be addressed in evaluating the risk of great power war, and what other issues and movements are elements in building movements that might forge a path to a world that is genuinely more peaceful? And, what then must we do?

The conference will bring together activists and academics with knowledge and experience about emerging dangers in key regions, from wars, resource conflicts and profound ongoing political realignments in the Middle East, to growing tensions in the Western Pacific over territory and resources as well as the U.S. strategic “pivot” to Asia. As we learned at the height of the Cold War--also the peak of a wave of liberation and environmental movements--people and popular movements determine if we have war or peace, justice or oppression. Join us on May 3 to face our past, confront the present, and think about how to build our future.

Registration information: There is no charge for the conference. An inexpensive lunch will be available on site at cost. We would appreciate pre-registrations indicating whether people wish to purchase lunch. Please indicate whether you would like a vegetarian meal. Register by writing to Jennifer Sherys-Rivet at JSherysr@afsc.org. For more information, call 617-661-6130.

Conference conveners and sponsors: American Friends Service Committee, Peace and Economic Security Program; International Peace Bureau; and the International Association of Lawyers Against Nuclear Arms and its U.S. affiliates, Lawyers Committee on Nuclear Policy and the Western States Legal Foundation.

Endorsing Organizations: Abolition 2000 Global Network to Eliminate Nuclear Weapons, Peace Action

Our thanks to the Rosa Luxembourg Foundation for their support.