## The Great War, Again? Today's global tensions echo the lead-up to World War I. Could this be the end for our world order?

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| Annotations: Connections to Tasks |
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## [Ilan Berman](http://www.usnews.com/topics/author/ilan_berman)

## July 25, 2014

It was a century ago this summer – on June 28, 1914 – that Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip fired the “shot heard round the world,” assassinating Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian empire, in Sarajevo. The killing served as a catalyst for conflict, bringing long-simmering tensions between various European nations to a boil. The result was a conflagration that was both global in scale and massive in its human toll. All told, more than 37 million souls perished in what became known as the “war to end all wars.”

Fast forward a century, and the parallels are striking.

Like 100 years ago, the international system is coming unglued. Back then, the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy was arrayed against the Triple Entente (the Russian Empire, France and the United Kingdom) in a tenuous strategic balance. Great power competition and imperial impulses had touched off a “scramble for Africa” late in the 19th century, resulting in the large-scale and rapid colonization of that continent by the early 20th. And in the Middle East, the once-mighty Ottoman Empire had become the “sick man of Europe,” riven by conflicts along its periphery and torn apart by internal political strife.

Today, similar divisions dominate headlines from Europe to the Middle East. The civil war in Syria, hostilities between Israel and the radical Hamas movement in the Palestinian territories, and Russia’s ongoing troublemaking in Ukraine are just the most public symptoms of a deeper, and deeply alarming, ailment: the unraveling of the existing global order.

Like in 1914, extreme ideologies are currently on the march. In the early 20th century, the furies of nationalism, imperialism and militarism undermined the tenuous geopolitical balance that had been struck between the nations of Europe in the aftermath of the conflicts of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, from the 1887-1888 Russo-Turkish War to the 1912-1913 Balkan Wars.

Today, the radical worldview of groups like al-Qaida and the Islamic State group threaten to ignite a sectarian conflagration in the Middle East. Rampant imperial impulses have propelled Russia to annex Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula – and, quite possibly, into a new cold war between the Kremlin and the West. In Asia, meanwhile, China is busy establishing – and enforcing – claims to contested territory in the East and South China Seas in a way that has roiled relations with its neighbors and called into question the durability of the region’s existing alliance structure.

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Early last century, the international system was defined by the absence of a benign hegemon. Instead, great power rivalries and feuds among royal families were the global norm, with all of the instability that accompanied this state of affairs.

Similarly, today the world is functioning without a global “sheriff.” Over the past six years, the Obama administration has systematically abdicated the role of global watchman that the United States assumed in the wake of the Second World War, constricting its foreign policy horizons and drawing down its military capabilities. It has chosen to do so, moreover, despite gathering global threats. America’s top spy, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, said as much in an interview last year: "in my almost 50 years in intelligence, I don't remember when we've had a more diverse array of threats and crisis situations around the world to deal with.”

One hundred years ago, Princip’s bullet provided the spark that ignited a global conflict and fundamentally redrew the map of the world. In the aftermath of his actions, the Austro-Hungarians prepared for war against Serbia, spurring the Russians to mobilize. Germany invaded Belgium and Luxembourg, prompting Great Britain to become involved. The expanding conflict drew in other powers, including the Ottoman Empire, Italy, Bulgaria, and eventually the United States. By the time the “Great War” drew to a close in 1918, the four empires that had dominated much of the previous century – the German, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman and Russian – were no more.

Today, the sparks that could touch off a large-scale conflict abound in the Middle East, Europe and Asia. For leaders in Washington and elsewhere, then, the anniversary of that bloody day in the Balkans is a timely reminder that the current structure of world politics is far from permanent – and that their ability to establish and preserve peace today will help determine the shape of the world for much of the century to come.

**Syria's Assad warns of a 'powder keg' sparking a 'regional war'** By Patrick J. McDonnell [September 02, 2013](http://articles.latimes.com/2013/sep/02)|

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Syrian President Bashar Assad has warned that foreign military intervention in his nation’s internal conflict could set off a “powder keg” and spark a “regional war,” according to interview excerpts published Monday.

“Chaos and extremism would ensue. There is a risk of regional war,” Assad said in the interview with the French daily Le Figaro, excerpts of which were published Monday in English on the [France 24](http://www.france24.com/en/20130902-assad-syria-france-interview-figaro) news website.

The 2 1/2-year Syrian civil war has already had a destabilizing effect on neighboring nations, sending hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing into Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Iraq. Cross-over violence linked to the Syrian conflict has also broken out outside Syria's borders.

France has indicated that it may join the United States in a punitive military strike against Syria for a suspected poison gas attack outside Damascus last month that is reported to have hundreds.

In the interview, Assad called the allegation “illogical.” The incident occurred Aug. 21 while United Nations chemical weapons inspectors were in Damascus and as the Syrian military was making battlefield gains.

Syrian officials have accused antigovernment rebels of releasing the gas in a bid to draw foreign intervention against Assad’s government. The opposition has denied unleashing toxic substances.

“Those who make accusations must show evidence,” Assad told Le Figaro. “We challenge the United States and France to do this.”

Washington says it has “high confidence” in intelligence assessments that Assad’s forces carried out the attack and that it killed more than 1,400 people.

French authorities on Monday released a report implicating Assad's government in three chemical attacks, including the Aug. 21 incident outside Damascus, [France 24](http://www.france24.com/en/20130902-assad-three-chemical-attacks-french-report-syria) reported. The French inquiry put the number killed Aug. 21 at 281 or more, far lower than the death toll reported by U.S. officials.

Also on Monday, Russia, a key ally of Assad, dismissed the U.S. evidence of a Syrian military chemical attack as “nothing concrete, no geographic coordinates or details,” in the words of Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Russian President Vladimir Putin has labeled as “utter nonsense” the idea that Assad’s military would unleash poison gas in the Damascus suburbs while U.N. chemical weapons inspectors were in the Syrian capital.

The U.N. inspection team has returned to Europe and is analyzing biological and environmental samples and other data taken at sites of the alleged mass chemical killing. The U.N. says it could take up to three weeks to determine if chemical agents were deployed.