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Historical Analogies in Policy-Making: Crimea, World War I and East Asia

By Bernard Fook Weng Loo

Synopsis

From portraying the on-going Sino-Japanese tensions as a parallel to the lead-up to World War I, to the Crimean situation as a prelude to German annexation of the Sudetenland, policymakers have always used historical analogies. This is potentially problematic.

Commentary

IT JUST had to happen: German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schaeuble reportedly likened Russian President Vladimir Putin's recent actions in the Crimea to Nazi Germany's annexation of the former Czechoslovakia in 1938. Earlier in March, former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also drew parallels between Nazi Germany's annexation of territories in the 1930s to the on-going situation involving the Crimea.

2014 was already a significant year. After all, one hundred years ago, one of the most traumatic experiences in human history – World War I – broke out. This was a war that claimed the lives of nine million combatants alone, making it one of the deadliest wars in human history. It spawned political revolutions, and laid the foundations for the eventual collapse of Europe's imperial system.

Drawing lessons from history

What makes 2014 even more remarkable is that it might also be the year of the historical analogy. Or at least, it is the year that policymakers throughout the world would draw analogies to past historical events and personalities to mobilise public support. Earlier this year, some scholars wondered if on-going tensions in the Asia-Pacific region – and in particular the Sino-Japanese territorial disputes over islets in the East China Sea – might be analogous to the various crises that emerged in 1914 and led to the outbreak of this first global cataclysm.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe also drew parallels between current Sino-Japanese relations and Anglo-German relations leading up to World War I. No prizes for guessing who Abe thought assumed the role of Imperial Germany and Kaiser Wilhelm.

These historical analogies have not stopped there, either. Moving beyond Sino-Japanese relations and the East China Sea, the use (or misuse?) of historical analogies has spread into the territorial disputes in the South China Sea as well. Philippine President Benigno Aquino III, for instance, earlier this year drew parallels

between Chinese behaviour in the South China Sea to Nazi Germany's annexation of the former Czechoslovakia.

As *The New York Times* reported on 4 February 2014, President Aquino said: "If we say yes to something we believe is wrong now, what guarantee is there that the wrong will not be further exacerbated down the line ... At what point do you say, 'Enough is enough?' Well, the world has to say it. Remember that the Sudetenland was given in an attempt to appease Hitler to prevent World War II."

Analogical reasoning is, of course, nothing remarkable, inasmuch as policymakers very often resort to analogical reasoning, consciously or otherwise. Policymakers will often invoke Munich, or Korea, or Vietnam, to help them either understand crises that are unfolding, or use them to mobilise public opinion. Munich and Korea were instrumental in how the United States arrived at a decision to support a non-Communist regime in the then-South Vietnam. More recently, the Vietnam War analogy was used by any number of defence analysts as a cautionary tale as the US prepared to mobilise international support for its planned invasion of Iraq.

Danger of analogous reasoning

But just because policymakers often use historical analogies to help them understand an unfolding situation does not mean that analogical reasoning is not fraught with potential dangers. Indeed, the noted geopolitical analyst Robert Kaplan wrote in *The Washington Post*, "Historical analogy is useful for rough orientation. But it is dangerous when taken too far; each situation is its own thing, thoroughly unique ... great statesmen ... exploit unique opportunities, even as they are aware of vague parallels to the past."

Therein lies the potential problem of historical analogies. Every situation is indeed unique, containing a particular set of circumstances – both proximate and distant – that cannot be replicated in full across geopolitical time and space. There are some parallels between Russia's actions in the Crimea and Hitler's annexation of the Sudetenland in 1938 and the eventual Anschluss unification with Austria.

Putin has spoken of ethnic Russian minorities in the former Soviet republics. But Hitler had a geopolitical vision – the domination of Europe – and the reunification of German-speaking peoples was merely the means by which he could acquire the critical mass needed to attain that geopolitical end-state. Putin appears to want to restore Russia to a central global position in international politics, something the former Soviet Union enjoyed for much of the post-World War II era.

However, it does not mean Putin seeks to restore the former Soviet "empire". Nor does it mean Putin seeks to establish a Russia that dominates the Eurasian landmass, even if one of the founding fathers of geopolitics and geostrategy, Halford Mackinder, posited this thesis – whoever dominates the Eurasian landmass dominates the world – in his article, "The Geographical Pivot of History" in 1904.

So what are we to make of this?

So what are we to make of this recent and on-going use – or is it overuse, or abuse? – of historical analogies? In these cases, policymakers were likely using historical analogies to mobilise public opinion, whether domestically or internationally. As noted earlier, President Aquino said, "Well, the world has to say it."

In so doing, President Aquino was clearly attempting to mobilise regional opinion in support of the Philippines' position – whether right or wrong – on this on-going dispute. Prime Minister Abe was almost certainly attempting to play to the wider regional audience as well, for right or wrong.

If policymakers use historical analogies to make sense of on-going issues, they nevertheless ought to be aware of the inherent limitations to analogical reasoning. However, if policy makers use historical analogies to mobilise public opinion, then the public ought to be conscious that such exercises are open to mischief and abuse.

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