

A Miscalculated Risk: Austria-Hungary, the “Blank Cheque” and the Origins of the First World War

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines whether Austria-Hungary would have gone to war with Serbia and thereby initiated the First World War if it had not received the “blank cheque” from Germany on July 5th and 6th, 1914. The article begins by exploring political debates over war against Serbia in Austria-Hungary’s Ministerial Council following the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, as informed by the diverse personal and domestic interests of the council’s members. It then analyzes the probability of Austro-Hungarian victory in a hypothetical invasion of Serbia without German support. Possibilities of a peaceful resolution of the assassination crisis that may have been achieved without German obstruction are also taken into account. Overall, this paper concludes that an Austro-Hungarian invasion of Serbia in 1914 becomes unlikely without the blank cheque. It also offers insights into the role of diplomatic support in emboldening risk-taking by states past and present, even when major wars are possible. The extent to which such support is unconditionally guaranteed in alliances continues to be an important factor when de-escalating international crises today.

Introduction

On June 28th, 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, was assassinated in Sarajevo.¹ The city was the capital of Austrian-controlled Bosnia and was coveted by Serb nationalists, one of whom was the archduke’s assassin.² Spurred by outrage at the killing and fear of similar turmoil in its Slav territories, Austro-Hungarian officials set their sights on punishing Serbia by force for its alleged role in the assassination plot.³ Serbia, however, had a close partnership with Russia, preventing Austria-Hungary from easily defeating its weaker neighbour in a potential war and causing it to look for assistance from its ally Germany.⁴

¹ Frank C. Zagare, “After Sarajevo: Explaining the Blank Check.” *International Interactions* 35, no. 1 (2009): 107, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050620902743960>.

² James Joll and Gordon Martel, *The Origins of the First World War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 12–13.

³ Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 13.

⁴ Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 14.

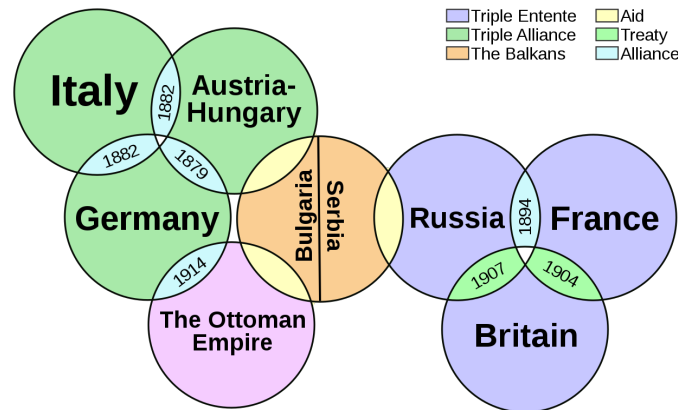


Figure 1. Xiaphias, *A diagrammatic illustration of European political alliances in the period leading up to the First World War*, January 17, 2021, Wikimedia Commons, accessed May 7, 2022, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:WWIchartX.svg>.

Such assistance was promised through a July 5th guarantee from German Kaiser (Emperor) Wilhelm II that Austria-Hungary could “count on Germany’s full support” even in the event of “grave European complications” as well as a July 6th telegram from German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg reaffirming that the Kaiser would “faithfully stand by Austria-Hungary.”⁵

This so-called “blank cheque” was the final push that unified the highest echelons of Austria-Hungary’s government behind a war against Serbia, which would be started through an ultimatum that Austria-Hungary knew Serbia could not accept and trigger the First World War.⁶ Austro-Hungarian deployment plans would also have been unlikely to come to a quick and decisive conclusion without German assistance, deterring Austria-Hungary from war. Finally, a world where Germany did not issue a blank cheque would have made a peaceful settlement and de-escalation of Austro-Serbian tensions more likely. These factors make it unlikely that Austria-Hungary would have gone to war alone in July of 1914 if it had not received the blank cheque.

Overcoming Government Divisions Through the Blank Cheque

At the dawn of the 20th century, the Austro-Hungarian government was far from a unified body with a single foreign policy. The economic conflict known as the Pig War (1906 to 1911), for instance, had split lawmakers along ethnic lines. It had involved the German-speaking Austrians in the government imposing a moratorium on Serbian livestock imports, whereupon the empire’s Hungarians questioned the action’s effectiveness and economic impact while its Slavs were outright incensed by the attack on their ethnic compatriots in Serbia.⁷ Divisions again arose in the 1908 Bosnian Crisis, centred around Austria-Hungary’s formal annexation of Bosnia, which had been under military occupation since 1878. When Serbia and Russia protested the move, Chief of the General Staff Conrad von Hötzendorf immediately proposed an invasion of Serbia to force it to agree to the annexation. However, von Hötzendorf soon had to back down in the face of opposition from Franz Ferdinand and the Hungarian government, as well as hesitancy from Emperor Franz Joseph himself.⁸ The intractable

⁵ Fritz Fischer, *Germany’s Aims in the First World War* (New York, New York: W.W. Norton, 1967), 53.

⁶ Laurence Lafore, *The Long Fuse: An Interpretation of the Origins of World War I* (Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1997), 249.

⁷ Lafore, *The Long Fuse*, 148.

⁸ Lafore, *The Long Fuse*, 157–158.

general once again advocated war against Austria-Hungary's putative ally Italy in 1911 after the kingdom had seized the Dodecanese Islands from the Ottoman Empire, threatening the Balkans. Once again, he was stopped by Franz Joseph and Foreign Minister Alois von Aehrenthal, the former of which sacked him as chief of staff (later reappointed in 1912).⁹ Such rifts illustrated Austria-Hungary's "deep inability to agree on any constructive policy" in the years leading up to 1914, most of all full-scale war.¹⁰

The assassination of the archduke on June 28th considerably hardened opinions in the Ministerial Council of Austria-Hungary, made up of the prime ministers of Cisleithania (a territory primarily made up of Austria) and Hungary, the common ministers, several archdukes and the Chief of the General Staff.¹¹ There was regret of leniency towards Serbia in previous diplomatic disputes, as well as reignited fears of pan-Slav nationalism.¹² The Serb version of the latter movement involved the incorporation of all lands inhabited by South Slavs into a superstate stretching from Slovenia in the north to Macedonia in the south.¹³ Austria-Hungary was thus understandably worried about this inspiring separatism in its Croatian, Bosnian and Slovenian holdings.¹⁴ Franz Ferdinand himself had been a moderate in the imperial government with sympathies for the South Slavs and ideas of "trialism," where a third Slav state would be created within the Dual Monarchy of Austria and Hungary.¹⁵ This had been evident in his aforementioned cautious response to the Bosnian Crisis back in 1908. Now, the hostility in the Ministerial Council solidified itself in a war party consisting of von Hötzendorf, Foreign Minister Leopold Berchtold and his Chief of Cabinet Count Alexander of Hoyos.¹⁶ The latter wanted to "mobilize the army against Serbia instantly."¹⁷

Still, all was not settled, as the Constitution of Austria-Hungary granted the Prime Minister of Hungary, István Tisza, a veto on decisions of war. He was "less persuaded by the expediency of drastic demonstrations of power" and personally held a "deep aversion to war."¹⁸ Tisza was also worried that Austria-Hungary defeating and annexing Serbia in a war would bring about trialism, which many Hungarians opposed on the basis that it would dilute their political voice in the imperial government.¹⁹ Berchtold, too, believed only in war with "positive and unconditional guarantees" of unconditional German support.²⁰ Thus, the blank cheque of July 4th, combined with Kaiser Wilhelm II's verbal assurances of support even in the case of "grave European complications," proved to be the tipping point.²¹ (Wilhelm was, of course, not the sole policymaker in Germany, but by July his pro-war stance was endorsed by other prominent figures in the government including Chief of the General Staff Helmuth von Moltke the Younger, German ambassador to Austria-Hungary Heinrich von Tschirschky, Under-Secretary of State in the Foreign Ministry Arthur Zimmermann and, most importantly, Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, whose approval was required by the Constitution of the German Empire to

⁹ Gordon Martel, *The Month that Changed the World: July 1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 88.

¹⁰ Lafore, *The Long Fuse*, 153.

¹¹ Zagare, "After Sarajevo," 117; A. J. P. Taylor, *The Habsburg Monarchy 1809–1918: A History of the Austrian Empire and Austria-Hungary* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1948), 135.

¹² Lafore, *The Long Fuse*, 208.

¹³ Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 13.

¹⁴ Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 13.

¹⁵ Lafore, *The Long Fuse*, 207.

¹⁶ Lafore, *The Long Fuse*, 208.

¹⁷ Lafore, *The Long Fuse*, 212.

¹⁸ Lafore, *The Long Fuse*, 212.

¹⁹ Lafore, *The Long Fuse*, 212.

²⁰ Lafore, *The Long Fuse*, 212.

²¹ Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, 53.

make a blank cheque-type guarantee.²²) Berchtold was now convinced of war, and swayed Tisza to the war party by arguing that their hesitation “would be taken as a sign of weakness in Berlin,” endangering the Triple Alliance between the two countries as well as Italy.²³ The foreign minister also promised no annexation of Serbian territory aside from some frontier bridgeheads along the Sava and Danube rivers.²⁴ Tisza folded, and by July 14th Berchtold could send the German ambassador to Berlin with a message that “to his great pleasure, a general agreement on the tenor of the note [the softened term for “ultimatum” used to placate Tisza] to be transmitted to Serbia had been arrived at.”²⁵ Thanks to the political unity granted by Germany’s blank cheque of unconditional support, Austria-Hungary had started down the road to war.

Austro-Hungarian War Plans

Austro-Hungarian war plans were of little worth without German backing. Von Hötzendorf’s strategies were “dependent on Germany’s support,” considering that Russia could intervene to defend its fellow Slavs in the kingdom and expand its influence in the Balkan Peninsula.²⁶ He and the rest of the war party were also pushed to accept the risk of Russian intervention to avoid the humiliation of the great power of Austria-Hungary by a few subversives from insignificant little Serbia. This pressure was exacerbated by anti-Serbian public sentiment, which was amplified in Austrian newspapers.²⁷ German officials, too, urged Austria-Hungary to make the gamble against Serbia and Russia in the days following the blank cheque, arguing that “Austria *must* act if its position as a Great Power was to be preserved.”²⁸ Some in the Austro-Hungarian government even hoped that Germany could “frighten Russia into inaction” through a blank cheque and then have its way with Serbia without any further meddling.²⁹ And though the cheque itself was not made public, visible support from Germany certainly would be, enabling Austria-Hungary to hopefully crush Serbia before Russia could even decide on war.³⁰ Indeed, this Austro-German unity was reaffirmed in announcements like a German warning to Russia on July 30th that Russia must halt its partial mobilization against “us and Austria-Hungary.”³¹ Overall, the war planners of Austria-Hungary had decided that, in some way or another, the Russian threat could be dealt with if they were armed with the blank cheque.

When it came to the war plans themselves, the first months of the Austro-Hungarian invasion of Serbia were clear evidence of the empire’s need for German aid against Serbia and Russia. Austro-Hungarian forces came up against stubborn resistance from the little Serbian kingdom. Four successive military drafts, combined with the troops already active from the recent Balkan Wars, meant that Serbia mobilized faster than any other

²² Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, 50–54.

²³ Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, 56; Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 15.

²⁴ Lafore, *The Long Fuse*, 219.

²⁵ Lafore, *The Long Fuse*, 219–220.

²⁶ Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, 53.

²⁷ Lafore, *The Long Fuse*, 212.

²⁸ Lafore, *The Long Fuse*, 217.

²⁹ Imanuel Geiss, “The Outbreak of the First World War and German War Aims.” *Journal of Contemporary History* 1, no. 3 (1966): 90–91, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002200946600100304>.

³⁰ Geiss, “The Outbreak of the First World War and German War Aims,” 85.

³¹ Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 15.

belligerent in 1914.³² This prevented Austria-Hungary from achieving numerical superiority.³³ These problems were further compounded by Russian forces moving into Galicia, where the Austro-Hungarian invasion force's 2nd Army had to be redirected to deal with the enemy advance.³⁴ As a result, Serbian forces were able to repel the initial Austro-Hungarian invasion by the end of August 1914.³⁵

These military difficulties, which Austria-Hungary faced even with German support, would have been even more severe when fighting on its own. Nor could it rely on the military support of other allies in the so-called Triple Alliance. Nationalists in Italy clamoured for the conquest of the Austro-Hungarian regions of Trentino to the north as well as Istria and Dalmatia on the Adriatic Sea due to their Italian-speaking populations, making Austria-Hungary wary of its ally's intentions in a potential war.³⁶ These tensions were mutual, with von Hötzendorf himself having proposed an opportunistic, preventive attack on Italy in 1911 while the latter was tied down in its invasion of Ottoman Libya.³⁷ The Kingdom of Romania had also secretly acceded to the Triple Alliance in 1883, but their loyalty to the agreement was put into question by the opposition of many Romanians to Hungarian rule over their ethnic compatriots in Transylvania.³⁸ Such was this discontent that the Romanian government did not even dare to make its alliance public to its citizens.³⁹ Indeed, both Italy and Romania would eventually join the First World War on the side of the Entente against the Triple Alliance and would be awarded parts of their territorial claims at the ensuing Paris Peace Conference in 1919.⁴⁰ Austria-Hungary thus could not depend on its other allies in the Triple Alliance in a possible war against Serbia and Russia, making Germany's support essential.

As a result, it seems unlikely that Austria-Hungary would have pressed forward with the invasion of Serbia without the blank cheque. And although the government's decision-making process in July of 1914 was certainly clouded by a nationalist desire to punish Serbia for its transgressions, this was partially due to an overestimation of the deterrent effect of the blank cheque.⁴¹ Russian intervention was still strategically considered, as demonstrated by von Hötzendorf drawing up two separate plans for the upcoming war: "Plan B" focusing on invading Serbia and "Plan R" targeting Russia as well.⁴² (He ultimately ended up drawing from both, as exemplified by his relocation of the 2nd Army from the Serbian front to the Russian front.⁴³) Without functional war plans, it is unlikely that Austria-Hungary would have been able to invade Serbia on its own.

³² Jonathan Gumz, "The Habsburg Empire, Serbia, and 1914: The Significance of a Sideshow," in *1914: Austria-Hungary, the Origins, and the First Year of World War I*, eds. Günter Bischof, Ferdinand Karlsrufer, Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., (New Orleans, Louisiana: University of New Orleans Press, 2014), 128.

³³ Gumz, "The Habsburg Empire, Serbia, and 1914," 130.

³⁴ Gumz, "The Habsburg Empire, Serbia and 1914," 131.

³⁵ Gumz, "The Habsburg Empire, Serbia and 1914," 131.

³⁶ Martel, *The Month that Changed the World*, 88.

³⁷ Martel, *The Month that Changed the World*, 88.

³⁸ Martel, *The Month that Changed the World*, 90.

³⁹ Martel, *The Month that Changed the World*, 90.

⁴⁰ Margaret MacMillan, *Paris 1919* (New York: Random House, 2002), 135, 290.

⁴¹ Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., "Austria-Hungary Opts for War," in *Essays on World War I: Origins and Prisoners of War*, eds. Samuel R. Williamson, Jr. and Peter Pastor, (New York, New York: Social Science Monographs, Columbia University Press, 1983), 14.

⁴² Williamson, "Austria-Hungary Opts for War," 15.

⁴³ Williamson, "Austria-Hungary Opts for War," 15.

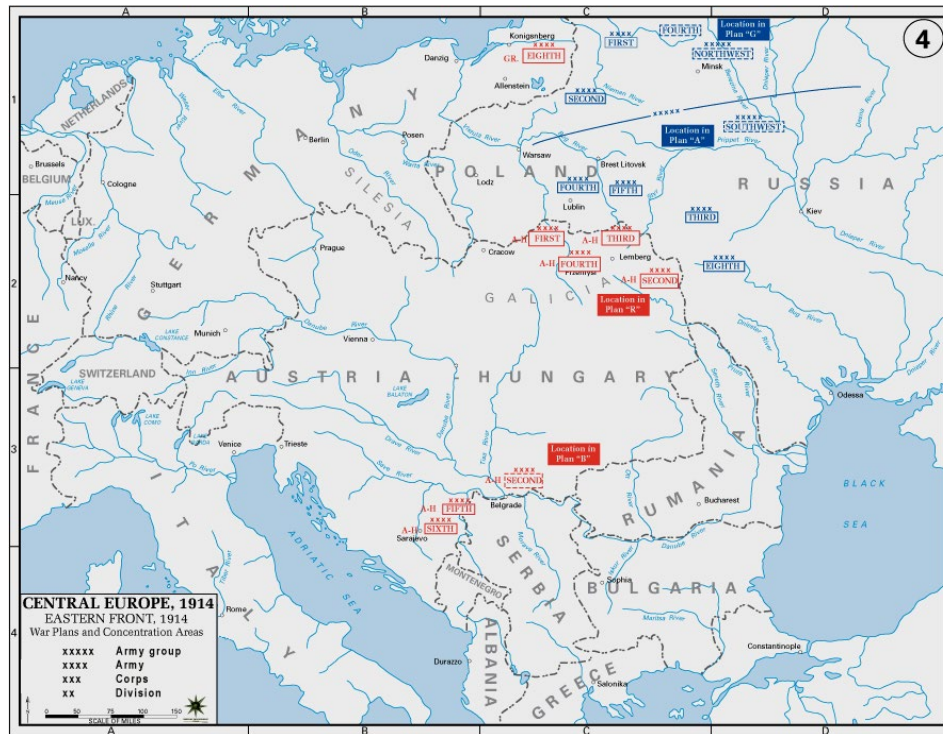


Figure 2. From August to September of 1914, the Austro-Hungarian 2nd Army was moved from its location in Plan B, the invasion of Serbia, to its location in Plan R, the defence against Russia. *Central Europe, 1914, Eastern Front, War Plans and Concentration Areas*, “United States Military Academy West Point,” July 31, 2012, accessed April 17th, 2022, https://www.westpoint.edu/sites/default/files/inline-images/academics/academic_departments/history/WWI/WWOne04.pdf.

Alternatives to War

There were also peaceful measures available to resolve the Austro-Serbian dispute. Though relations between the two countries were mired in a “calamitous downward spiral” leading up to 1914, this hostility did not have to manifest itself in military conflict.⁴⁴ In the Pig War, for instance, Austria-Hungary had wielded the “economic sword” in the form of a moratorium on all Serbian livestock imports to punish Serbia for its economic provocations.⁴⁵ The fact that German absence would have deterred the empire from bloodier “swords” makes a similar result more likely after the assassination of Franz Ferdinand.

The lack of a blank cheque would have also presented an opportunity for a diplomatic settlement of the Serbian question. During the First Balkan War from 1912–1913, British Foreign Secretary Edward Grey had presided over the London Conference, attended by all of the European powers.⁴⁶ The talks concluded with the Treaty of London, ending the conflict without a broader European war. Success in the latter was in no small part due to Germany’s inability to provide unconditional support to Austria-Hungary, whose government was debating whether to opportunistically intervene in the war to expand their empire’s Balkan influence.⁴⁷ (At the time, the German military was not ready for involvement in the Balkan Wars, with the widening of the Kiev Canal in the north and the build-up of the navy still incomplete.⁴⁸) Without German support, Austria-Hungary

⁴⁴ Lafore, *The Long Fuse*, 147.

⁴⁵ Lafore, *The Long Fuse*, 148.

⁴⁶ Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 79.

⁴⁷ Martel, *The Month that Changed the World*, 88.

⁴⁸ Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 77.

had little chance of a successful war without coming up against opposition from the other European powers who would be present at the London Conference, and the empire dutifully accepted peace for the moment.

The situation was different in 1914. Grey again made proposals for mediation either by the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Italy or directly between Austria-Hungary and Serbia following the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum.⁴⁹ France and Italy agreed, but the scheme was ultimately sunk by German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, who, bound by the blank cheque, replied that his country “could not bring Austria’s dealings with Serbia before a European tribunal.”⁵⁰ Had Germany not adopted such obligations to Austria-Hungary through the blank cheque, a similar kind of peaceful mediation could have taken place in the aftermath of Franz Ferdinand’s assassination.

Emboldened by German support, Austria-Hungary had historically issued an ultimatum to Serbia on July 23rd requiring unconditional acceptance of all ten demands within 48 hours.⁵¹ It was, of course, deliberately designed to be unacceptable to the Serbian government and its nationalist citizens in order to justify war upon its rejection.⁵² Serbia ended up “doing the best they could,” completely accepting five demands, conditionally accepting four and rejecting one mandating that Austro-Hungarian agents take part in investigating the assassination plot.⁵³ This was, of course, not enough to prevent the looming invasion and conflagration of the First World War.

However, a lack of German support through the blank cheque could have lessened the probability of a war even if an ultimatum had still been issued. One reason is Austria-Hungary’s delay in mobilizing its troops after Serbia’s response to the ultimatum. Von Hötzendorf began the mobilization on July 27th but only planned to invade on August 12th, and the imperial government delayed its declaration of war.⁵⁴ This frustrated Germany, whose State Secretary of the Foreign Office Gottlieb von Jagow warned Austro-Hungarian ambassador to Germany László Szógyény-Marich Jr. that a declaration of war must follow “immediately” after Serbia’s rejection of the ultimatum and “any delay in beginning warlike reparations is regarded here as a great danger in respect of intervention of other powers.”⁵⁵ The German government was “bent on preventing any mediation,” which at that point also included potential negotiations between Russia and Austria-Hungary.⁵⁶ Specifically, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Sazonov had “gotten over his temper” during Austria-Hungary’s delay in invading Serbia and held a “remarkably friendly” meeting with the Austro-Hungarian ambassador, Count Frigyes Szapáry, where they agreed to continue dialogue between the two empires as well as possible British mediation.⁵⁷ Szapáry nonetheless did not have the authority to begin such talks on his own and his country would declare war on Russia on August 6th.⁵⁸

Still, this situation presents the possibility of a peaceful solution after Serbia refused the ultimatum in a counterfactual world where Germany did not provide the blank cheque. The lack of German support in a war against Russia would have made it more difficult for the Austro-Hungarian government to give into its push for a speedy declaration of war, and the gradual cooling of Russian outrage could have led to diplomatic talks, whether it be direct dialogue between Russia and Austria-Hungary or a British-mediated conference between all European powers.

⁴⁹ Fischer, *Germany’s Aims in the First World War*, 67.

⁵⁰ Fischer, *Germany’s Aims in the First World War*, 68.

⁵¹ Lafore, *The Long Fuse*, 226.

⁵² Lafore, *The Long Fuse*, 249.

⁵³ Lafore, *The Long Fuse*, 235.

⁵⁴ Lafore, *The Long Fuse*, 236.

⁵⁵ Geiss, “The Outbreak of the First World War and German War Aims,” 84.

⁵⁶ Geiss, “The Outbreak of the First World War and German War Aims,” 84.

⁵⁷ Lafore, *The Long Fuse*, 238.

⁵⁸ Lafore, *The Long Fuse*, 238.

Conclusion

It is thus unlikely that Austria-Hungary would have attacked Serbia in 1914, igniting the First World War, without the blank cheque. Unconditional German backing removed the last obstacle to the approval of war against Serbia in the Austro-Hungarian government. Austro-Hungarian invasion plans were unworkable without German support against Russia, making it unlikely for the empire to have declared a losing war on Serbia following the assassination of Franz Ferdinand. Opportunities for peaceful settlement would have also been opened without the blank cheque.

In history, the blank cheque would not only ignite one of bloodiest wars in world history but also become a point of reference for subsequent conflicts where world powers offered tacit support for their partners' aggression. Events ranging from the United States' backing of Israel in its conflict with Palestine to France's backing of Chad in their conflict with Islamist insurgents have all been criticized as blank cheques with similarly destructive consequences as in 1914.⁵⁹ Still, the extent of the commitment between the senior and junior members in these alliances differs markedly from that between Germany and Austria-Hungary in 1914. Unlike Kaiser Wilhelm's promises that Austria-Hungary could "count on Germany's full support" even in the case of "grave European complications," the more recent alliances have never been explicitly or completely unconditional. They are still dependent on the alignment of the partners' geopolitical interests, and cannot obstruct relations with other allies of the senior partner in the Middle East or Sahel. Namely, France requires Chad to aid in its military campaign against Islamist armed groups in the region, while the United States must juggle the interests of allies like Saudi Arabia and Turkey, which may contradict those of Israel.

Even in the case of a partnership as strong as that between the United States and the United Kingdom in the Second World War, it was never so unconditional that it would guarantee American military involvement at Britain's wishes. The USA would only enter the war in 1941 after it was attacked at Pearl Harbour by Japan, and even then it waited for the main adversary, Germany, to declare war on it rather than the inverse.⁶⁰ Perhaps the rise of international human rights norms made it difficult to grant unconditional blank cheques after 1914 for fear of the support being abused to violate human rights in the name of both alliance partners. Democracies have also become much more common in the years since, making it unlikely for a majority of legislators to unite behind a position as uncompromising as a blank cheque or for a single official to issue one unilaterally. And even if one were issued, it would not be a particularly reliable guarantee since a new government could soon be elected. Germany's blank cheque to Austria-Hungary, then, is not only remarkable in its ignition of the First World War but also its uniqueness in history.

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⁶⁰ "Japan, China, the United States and the Road to Pearl Harbor, 1937–41," Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute, United States Department of State, July 21, 2007, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1937-1945/pearl-harbor>.

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