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Discussion Paper  
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***Session I: Uses and abuses of history –  
Parallels and differences between Europe in 1914 and Asia in 2014***

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## Assessing the danger of war in Asia: Parallels and differences between Europe in 1914 and East Asia in 2014

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Trying to assess the current developments in East Asia through the lens of past European experiences is surely interesting, but one should not expect that this would provide politicians, scholars and observers with a golden key to understand what is going on in that region today. But there is some virtue in looking for structural analogies between 1914 and today. There is even one relevant similarity between East Asia today and Europe 100 years ago: both regions had experienced some decades of peace and economic prosperity that was made possible through unparalleled economic globalization. It is a worthwhile endeavour to question why Europe went into the abyss after such a prosperous time period. This is a promising route to find evidence that enables the identification of basic structural problems that we have to be aware of. In searching for these clues, the theory-debate in international relations is only of limited value. Neither the theory of Thucydides' trap (which is basically a structural realist theory), nor theories of institutionalist, liberal or constructivist origin can provide us with more than just basic ideas on how to understand international relations.

If there are conclusions to be drawn, which might point to such structural analogies, at least four lessons are apparent:

1. The nature of the international system (both global and regional) is of utmost importance. It is decisive whether or not the international system is characterized by outright anarchy (and self-help) or by a more or less developed and institutionalized understanding among the main actors about the way to preserve peace and how to organize economic exchange. The situation before World War I was one in which a quite successful liberal international economic order (initiated by Great Britain) had set free economic dynamics and forces which created tectonic shifts in the military correlation of forces. These tectonic shifts, however, eventually created a strategic earthquake, because no functioning international security order existed any longer. In East Asia the situation is not totally different. Again, we have an international liberal economic order which has set free economic dynamics (mainly the economic rise of China, but that of other countries as well) that are translating into new geopolitical tectonic changes in the field of armed forces. The

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strategic balance in East Asia is being redrawn fundamentally with the growing assertiveness of China and the relative decline of the US. As with Europe at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the existing security order in East Asia is not yet characterized by outright anarchy, but the existing institutions are weak and the influence of the US as the external pacifier is, relatively speaking, in decline because of the growing shadow of China's military build-up. The regional institutions will remain weak because of the lack of unanimity among the smaller and medium sized powers and because of their insistence on the recognition of their sovereignty. It is hardly likely that China will take over the role of an external pacifier – at least not in the role of a benign hegemon, i.e. a hegemon which is accepted. Hence, this international regional system entails a number of uncertainties and is fraught with the danger that armed conflicts could emerge over territorial disputes and other problems. However, knowing that the international system in East Asia is fraught with uncertainties alone, does not give us an instrument to predict the future or to determine the really critical developments.

2. Internal domestic factors played an important role in Europe in not only causing the outbreak of the war but also in bringing forth the deadly dynamics that made it impossible to terminate it. World War I does not lend itself as a proof for the theory of democratic peace, a theory that holds that democracies do not fight wars against each other (unless one clings to the old propagandist formula according to which Britain, France and Russia were full-fledged democracies in 1914, while Germany was not). The reality was significantly more differentiated. In all capitals, foreign and defence policy was mainly made by representatives of the aristocracy, but all of them were under heavy pressure by public opinion. In all capitals (except St. Petersburg), there were strong parliamentary hurdles to overcome, most notably in Berlin, since the Kaiser could not go to war without the permission of the Parliament. Since 1912, the German *Reichstag* had a majority of Social Democrats, Centrists and moderate Liberals who were anything else but war-mongers. World War I demonstrated how easily domestic institutional hurdles against war can be overcome by nationalist feelings – which are often used by a traditional elite to stabilize their own power. It also showed how public opinion and nationalist feelings can make the termination of war almost impossible. A war is then fought with all available means until the very (bitter) end – i.e. the moment of exhaustion. In East Asia, the situation today has some similarities to Europe 100 years ago, but one has to make qualifications. In today's East Asia there is fertile ground for the escalation of limited crises into a major military

- exchange. These nationalist feelings can cause a minor military incident to develop into a major military confrontation. However, since the geography of Asia is considerably different from that of Europe, it is hard to presume that such an escalation would end in a major war comparable to World War I.
3. Both the absence of a stable international order and the existence of democratic as well as autocratic regimes using nationalist feelings for domestic stabilization and mobilization cannot alone explain the occurrence of limited conflicts escalating into a major war. As in 1914, it needs at least one actor who is isolated and who feels that the tidal waves of history work against him. Such an actor might be ready to take existential risks if international isolation translates into palpable strategic vulnerability. This was the situation of Germany in 1914, in today's East Asia only North Korea would qualify for such isolationism.
  4. One has to take into account military-technological developments and their interaction within a broader strategic framework. The Korean peninsula is one spot to look at with most scrutiny, but the emerging military competition between the US and China over the control of the South China Sea and the East China Sea and beyond entails even more serious risks. The current Chinese build-up of A2/AD capabilities might eventually lead the Chinese leadership to seriously consider the elimination of the US military presence in the region adjacent to China by a surprise attack that combines kinetic warfare, information warfare and cyber warfare. It is hardly likely that China is envisaging this "Pearl Harbor"-option today, but in their military preparations, the PLA is more or less proceeding in this direction. Today, the political goal behind this armament effort is to signal to the neighbouring states that there is no point in forming military alliances with the US, or to signal to the US that Washington cannot have good relations with Beijing, on the one hand, and form alliances in the region on the other hand. But one cannot exclude the possibility that the Chinese leadership would like to demonstrate, once and for all, who is actually the strong man in East Asia. Again, as in World War I, the state of the art in the field of military technology in combination with geography and likely chains of action and reaction can provide incentives for a first-strike. Unlike the situation before 1914, an awareness of these risks and issues exists today, at least in the US.