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100 years after World War I – Pathways to a secure Asia***

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Discussion Paper

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***Session II: “War by accident”? –
How to (de-)escalate conflicts with neighbors?***

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Managing Crisis and Preventing Conflict: Europe 1914 and Asia 2014 - A Discussion Paper

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Introduction

The strategic, economic and human catastrophe of World War One (WWI) began a hundred years ago this year. In recent months much has been written comparing that time with our present circumstances, particularly with the changing strategic situation in Asia. These analyses need to be scrutinized and questioned closely. The structural causes of WWI and indeed of WWII are markedly different to the drivers of strategic tensions in present-day Asia.

That said, there are some sobering lessons in crises management and the deficiencies of leadership, decision-making and crisis communications that are worth drawing out. We have to question how much more effective are these factors today than in 1914. It is also worth studying the factors at play in two other momentous years: 1941 and 1962. In 1941, Japan launched its devastating and tragic war in the Pacific. In 1962, the world came close to the brink of nuclear war with the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The debate among historians on the origins of WWI in some ways parallels the present day discussions we see about the rise of China. Many reasons have been put forward as to why WWI occurred. An interlinking web of alliances that drew nations in as the crisis unfolded; the rise of nationalism; imperialism; a series of arms races; misperception and miscalculation; the instabilities from changing power balances. When we look at the different reasons often talked about in terms of a conflict developing in Asia, there are some apparent similarities – history rhyming, if not repeating.

[What may cause](#) a conflict in Indo-Pacific Asia: whether the South China Sea, the East China Sea, the Korean Peninsula, between the U.S. and China more widely or, not to be overlooked, between India and Pakistan or, in the longer-term, between India and China? We need to consider the roles of strategic competition and mistrust, of nationalism, of perception and misperception, of calculation and miscalculation, and of alliances and strategic risk-taking.

Alliances and deterrence: stabilizing or destabilizing?

In my view, alliances, and deterrence relationships, play a markedly different role in Asia today than in Europe in 1914. Bear in mind, there are not two contending alliance systems. It is difficult to identify a present-day Asian equivalent to 1914 Serbia or Austria: regional powers willing to take major risks and to entangle their larger allies in those risks. Japan, Vietnam, Philippines: none fits the bill. We are all familiar with how Chinese analysts, in particular, decry the US alliance system as now part of the problem in Asia: but we also need to consider what Asian strategic dynamics would look like without a US role. Japan could well be a more destabilizing regional actor in those circumstances – perhaps even nuclear-armed.

Indeed, the critical question about alliances and stability in Asia today may not be whether alliances will cause war, but whether they are doing enough to discourage it? America faces questions of alliance credibility in Japan and perhaps among some other Asian allies, amid its perceived failures to stop conflict, aggression or instability in the Middle East and Ukraine.

As for the role of terrorism as a provocation to interstate war, the logical 21st century parallel is India-Pakistan, but here, under the nuclear shadow, India knows it has much to lose, and now has a track record of restraint. I am not convinced that will disappear under India's new government.

This takes us to the wider question of nuclear weapons and deterrence in Asia. Does the existence of nuclear weapons now abolish the possibility of interstate war? Clearly it has not eliminated strategic competition and strategic risk-taking. There appears to be a stability-instability paradox in play, where nations seeking to challenge the status quo feel they can do so under the nuclear shadow precisely because they are confident other powers will not want escalation: thus North Korea sinks a South Korean ship and bombards a South Korean island; Pakistan tolerates (or perhaps fosters) terrorism into India; and China asserts itself at sea against Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam, even in the face of US diplomatic condemnation.

Human agency and diplomacy: leadership and communication

Often these present day discussions about war in Asia (as with the historical debate about WWI) are made with a sense of inevitability, 'War will happen with China; this is how we will fight it,' third nations have to make a 'China choice,' 'The Gathering Storm.' These arguments imply a certain level of finality and determinism. As Joseph S. Nye [recently said](#), writing on this topic: "Historical analogies, though sometimes

useful for precautionary purposes, become dangerous when they convey a sense of historical inevitability.”

This is not to deny that changes in power are occurring in Asia. It is to say that these changes do not have to inevitably lead to war. There is a [real danger](#) in maritime Asia for miscalculation and even over the longer term a possibility for catastrophe, but that does not put us at 1914.

Graham Allison [has made the point](#) that “Historically, when rising assertiveness becomes hubristic, and fears paranoid, mutual exaggeration can feed misperceptions and miscalculations, spurring posturing and provocations that lead to unintended consequences.” If this is the case, then there is a need to look deeper into the individuals and decision processes by which these misperceptions and miscalculations spring.

The critical factor, now as in 1914 and 1941 and 1962, is human agency. In the face of dangerous structural drivers (strategic competition, mistrust, nationalism) it may not be fair to say that individual leaders should take the whole blame for starting wars – but we should not downplay the capacity of individual leaders to stop them from starting. The main lesson to draw from the origins of WWI and its relevance for today’s geo-political situation is not to focus on the ‘inevitable’ collision of social and political forces, but to focus on national leaders, the various other strategic decision-making actors (militaries and civilian agencies), and the structure and rationality of their decision-making processes.

Equally important is whether there are clear, real-time channels for communication with decision-maker in other countries. One hundred years since the rudimentary system of telegraph, telephone, and diplomatic meetings of 1914 – where half-a-day’s delay in delivering a message could change its meaning and impact entirely – how far have we really advanced? So-called hotlines between leaders or between militaries are a great idea in theory, but only if they are used: even now, crisis communications between China-Japan, China-Vietnam, China-US seem to be ad hoc and underdeveloped. They can only be effective if both sides want to talk, which has not, of late, been the case with China in its tensions with Japan and Vietnam: it seems to have used its unwillingness to communicate as a tool to increase other countries’ concerns about risk, thus discouraging them from pushing back against its maritime assertiveness.

Perhaps the best template for crisis diplomacy remains 1962: the origins of WWI were an instructive example for the Kennedy Administration during the Cuban Missile Crisis; perhaps the Crisis in turn could prove an instructive historical example for Asia today. National leaders were able to negotiate, temper their domestic hawks, and choreograph ways for their countries to back down from war.

Interdependence and institutions

Two other points of similarity or difference between 1914 and 2014 are interdependence and institutions.

Interdependence: The reasonably high levels of economic interdependence in Europe in 1914 are often cited as a reason why we cannot rely on interdependence to avert war in Asia in the 21st century. Such arguments can overlook some of the unique and unprecedented factors of the present day, notably societal and information-based interaction (the direction cross-border interactions of millions of people via media, social media, travel etc.), the greater complexity and scale of contemporary economic interdependence, and the fact that Asia is part of a wider globalized system of economic, societal and political interaction. Conflict in Asia would have global consequences, and global actors, including the EU and key European powers, have a stake and some influence in how strategic trends develop in Asia – for instance, whether a rules-based order can be salvaged in the South China Sea. Bear in mind that the EU has a critical economic stake in Asia's future, including as a leading trade and investment partner reliant on secure sea lanes and stable investment environments.

Institutions: How much of a difference in a future Asian crisis could multilateral institutions make? Asian diplomacy is often criticized for the apparent weakness of its multilateral institutions, but that is not entirely fair. In fact, Asia now has a healthy range of forums, such as the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum and ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus Eight, if only major countries are willing to use them and to invest them with a capacity to manage or mediate strategic issues. At present, China is unwilling to allow these institutions to play any kind of crisis-watch or crisis-management role with regard to its interstate tensions. And it is difficult to see other major states, including the United States, relying on those institutions in any sort of mediation role: although most Asia-Pacific countries now seem comfortable with these forums at least as venues in which to air strategic differences. In any case, Asian security forums are not responsive, well-resourced or in permanent session: we are yet to see one convened specifically to address a breaking crisis.

History repeating or rhyming?

When the historical analogy of 1914 and 2014 has been used, there are several parallels that have been pointed out in terms of comparing it to the geopolitical situation in the Indo-Pacific.

- Similarities between pre-1914 Europe and Asia today

- Nationalism, fuelled by historical memories of WWII has been on the rise in China and Japan, and has been used by the leadership in both countries. Another example is the recent riots in Vietnam related to the South China Sea Crisis.
- Territorial disputes
 - Territorial disputes in the Balkans between Austria-Hungary and Serbia/Russia; East and South China Sea.
- Lack of effective institutional mechanisms for security cooperation
 - None in the years before WWI/end of the concert of powers; East Asia Summit, UN proving ineffective in controlling tensions.
- Arms-races
 - German-Anglo Naval Arms Race; Chinese naval modernization, US-China strategic competition, hypersonic missiles, BMD, cyber, submarines.
- Economic interdependence
 - *The Great Illusion* by Normal Angell 1909 - ‘war does not pay’; economic interdependence between South Korea, China and Japan; China-US; impact of globalisation.
- A rising power that is starting to challenge the hegemon
 - Germany – Britain; China – U.S.
- Alliance network/s that may lead to one or more global powers entering a regional conflict
 - While the analogy of two groups of allied nations going to war does not work in the present day, a conflict between China and Japan could well draw the U.S. into a broader conflict.

Recently, there has been a rising sense of inevitability concerning the rise of China and the strategic situation in the Indo-Pacific. The sense of inevitability is built around not only the idea that there will be a conflict at some point, but that conflict would also involve the United States and China in a major war.

Some examples: (Asia’s Greatest Fear: A U.S.-China War, Robert Farley):
<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/asia-flames-us-china-war-10621>

(Why China and America are headed towards a Catastrophic Clash, Hugh White):
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/hugh-white/china-america-relations_b_5412014.html

(US-China Rivalry More Dangerous than Cold War? Zachary Keck):
<http://thediplomat.com/2014/01/us-china-rivalry-more-dangerous-than-cold-war/>

(The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia, John Mearsheimer)
<http://cjip.oxfordjournals.org/content/3/4/381.full>

However, new histories have cast fresh doubt on the inevitability of WWI. Notably two leading historians, Christopher Clark and Margaret MacMillan, have put emphasis on the individuals involved in making the decisions to go to war. These individuals, they argue, were distracted, unwilling to compromise, bereft of self-reflection, inflexible, paranoid and made geopolitical decisions based on, among other things, their own sense of individual honour. How confident can we be that these characteristics have been banished from strategic decision-making in Asia?

For example Margaret MacMillan [uses the example](#) of Britain, which argues 'might have acted decisively enough early in the crisis to have deterred Germany' but its leadership was preoccupied by a possible civil war in Ireland. The British Prime Minister at the time, Herbert Asquith, also seemed at least as preoccupied with a love affair as with matters of state.

Another key individual was of course Kaiser Wilhelm. The German leader had in previous crisis decided not to escalate the situation. But in 1914, according to MacMillan, knowing that 'officers in his beloved army referred to him contemptuously as Wilhelm the Timid' he was afraid of looking weak, even mentioning to a close friend 'This time I shall not give in.' This is said to have influenced his decision to issue the infamous 'blank cheque' to Austria-Hungary, promising Germany's support whatever the circumstances.

The internal decision making processes and individual responsibility of nations also has a role to play. Historian Christopher Clark [has argued](#) that in many cases in 1914 executive power in 'Germany, Russia and Austria-Hungary' were emperors who, while it is often assumed spoke for the ruling classes, often did not. He refers to the 'terrifying truth that it was an illusion that those who made or executed foreign policy spoke for the nation or even for the governing classes.' It was also often not clear who had decision rights, 'organizationally and constitutionally' over these matters. In addition, the information that these leaders received often was 'without oversight or order between ambassadors, staff and ministers.'

The July Crisis in 1914 is a history replete with human error, ego, inflexible leadership and a lack of critical self-reflection. It is also a story of poor organization and institutions, staffed by individuals that were unwilling or unable to go beyond their bounds. Above all it is a story of human agency, of people making decisions that led to war, decisions that could have been different or averted. There was no 'historical law' that decided 1914, just as there is no law that we will see war in Asia.

Two other years that matter: 1941 and 1962

In 1941, Japan launched its devastating and tragic war in the Pacific. I would argue that Japan 1941 is as worthy of study as Europe 1914 for the avoidance of future war in Asia – not because I think Japanese militarism is coming back (it is not; to claim otherwise is to echo Chinese official propaganda) but because the failures of strategic decision-making then hold lessons for the leadership in China as to how to avoid war in Asia in the years ahead. It can be argued that, individually, many among the Japanese civilian and even military leadership did not want a war with America, which they knew would be ruinous and unwinnable, but ultimately none was willing to challenge a military-led drift to conflict.

Another useful [historical analogy presents](#) itself with the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. The Cuban Missile Crisis is an example of an over-confident ally and its leader (Cuba) agitating against a larger power, seemingly confident that its patron will write it a ‘blank cheque.’ It is also an example of two leaders who [were ultimately willing to show restraint](#) in the face of internal military lobbying and advice, drawing on reasonably clear decision making pathways and responsibilities, and importantly an imperative to design a way for their countries to ‘save face’ and back down from war. Indeed, President Kennedy [even held some now-familiar views](#) as to why July 1914 led to war, saying that ‘European statesmen ‘somehow seemed to tumble into war,’ because of their ‘stupid, individual idiosyncrasies, misunderstandings, and personal complexes of inferiority and grandeur.’ The 1962 crisis is an important example of political design and human agency in averting a confrontation which, by a more mechanistic logic of security dilemmas and strategic mistrust, would have ended in war. It is thus one of three moments in history – along with 1914 and 1941 – that hold valuable lessons for keeping the peace in Indo-Pacific Asia and the world in the 21st century.

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