

Care for the old rather than sleepwalk into war in East Asia

Wolfgang Pape

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For Europeans, most of the islands in the China Sea of the West Pacific inspire dreams of white sandy beaches and lush palm trees. The local fishermen there, however, may well be dreaming of a borderless region like the one most Europeans enjoy here on this continent. The fishermen just want to cast their nets wherever they can find fish in the Pacific.

Talking recently to locals on islands in the East China Sea, including those belonging to Taiwan and others to Japan, one becomes more aware than ever, as a European, of the emptiness of the national sovereignty issue. As colonial powers, Europeans placed the concept of sovereignty at the centre of the international law that has evolved since the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, which has often led them to draw arbitrary borderlines, also in Asia.

Europe, fortunately, has learned through centuries of drifting (or 'sleepwalking')¹ into war between ostentatiously 'sovereign' states that only by sharing and integrating this basic right of state control can permanent peace be possible. In a globalising world we experience the interdependence of our economies on a daily basis. In Asia too, few people could enjoy their current lifestyles without the steady flow of goods and money across the borders that claim to define sovereignty. National borders are only obstacles when a Smartphone crosses them 100 times in its production line in Asia, before reaching the final market in the West. In a sense, one might say that North Korea is the most sovereign state in the world, yet with terrible consequences that we – probably only partly – understand.

However, in political rhetoric worldwide nationalists have recently tried to reclaim territory and fall back on this term 'sovereignty', although it has lost meaning in many ways. 'Upstream' national authority is gradually evaporating in the heat of global issues like the environment, the internet and trade that single countries can no longer solve on their own. 'Downstream' there is increasing identification with regional cultures and the resulting local demand for more participation in decision-making. The independence debate in Scotland and autonomy for Mindanao in the Philippines are just two examples of a trend towards greater proximity in the political identities of active citizens. Technically, the digital 'death of

¹ See the book on WWI by Christopher Clark, (2013) *"The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914"*, HarperCollins.

Wolfgang Pape is Associate Research Fellow at CEPS; former official of the European Commission and General Manager of the EU-Japan Centre for Industrial Cooperation.

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distance' greatly facilitates these tendencies towards multilevel governance and omnilateralism, where the 'nation' is only one among a number of entities of political power, ranging from the local to the global.

China's Premier Chou En-lai was pragmatic enough to shelve the issue of sovereignty over the islands in the East China Sea in order to restore normal relations with Japan, when in Beijing in 1972 Japan's Prime Minister Tanaka asked him "about the issue".² Rather, there were positive proposals of a joint development of resources.

Similarly, four decades later and after more than 17 years of negotiations, in April 2013 Japan and Taiwan suddenly broke down political barriers and signed a fishery agreement that creates and delineates common fishing zones around the fiercely contested islands. This was only made possible by Washington urging Tokyo to make concessions to Taipei for geopolitical reasons to pre-emptively discourage Taipei from cooperating with China on the island issue.³ The victims of this deal are the Japanese fishermen on the southernmost islands, who now have to share their fishing grounds more widely. They are thousands of kilometres away from Tokyo, but only a boat trip from Taiwan. The locals on both sides have long had friendly exchanges, beyond any borders or talk of sovereignty. They would have preferred to find some agreement among themselves, without the intervention of the authorities in distant capitals.

This shows that cooperation on resources is possible, even over disputed borders. These unclear border issues remain in the 'recurrent Cold War' in East Asia, as was intended by John Forster Dulles when drawing up the system of the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951 to prolong the US hegemony over the region. The distance and time from Westphalia to San Francisco might be considerable, but in the meantime power politics in East Asia have apparently not advanced very much. Even in homogenous Japan and Taiwan societies nowadays are deeply divided on many political issues, ranging from relations with neighbours to nuclear energy. However, next to the often overriding and omnipresent business interests⁴ there is a broad common denominator, including with China and Korea, in the immense demographic dynamics of the region. Their fast-greying, not to mention shrinking populations are already posing the desperate question: 'Who will pay for our pensions?' Instead of solid youngster-based pyramids they see round demographic maps shaped like Chinese lanterns (or reverse pyramids) – representing the development of their ageing populations. The resulting need for welfare for the elderly might lead to a kind of 'geriatric peace' in East Asia by 2030 – due to the simple economic necessity that leaves no room for any further expensive military build-up.⁵

² See Asahi Shimbun, 26.12.2012 at (http://ajw.asahi.com/article/special/Senkaku_History/AJ201212260103).

³ See *Strategic Vision*, Volume 2, Issue 11, Taipei, October 2013, p. 7.

⁴ See the more comprehensive paper by Wolfgang Pape that looks at potential cooperation: (<http://www.ceps.be/book/evolving-integration-east-asia-too-many-reservations>).

⁵ See Masohiro Matsumura, *Europe's World*, Spring 2014/No.26, p. 42.