

The security role that Europe should be playing in conflict-prone Asia



Inadvertently compromising America's security by blundering into Asia's trouble-spots is something that Europe must be careful to avoid, says **François Godement**. But there is nevertheless a compelling case for the EU to play an increasingly assertive role to underpin Asia's security

Should Europe's common defence and foreign policy extend to Asia, and if so what should be its main goals? Asia is of critical concern for Europe's security, both in the traditional and in the broader sense. Asia as a region, and even China by itself, is Europe's main trade and investment partner. Asia's fast rising energy consumption, and its threat to the global environment, cannot be ignored by Europe. Illegal immigration, financial crime, terrorist threats and health emergencies are all common problems in Asia. On the broader security front, nuclear proliferation and the development of ballistic missile systems are Asian-based threats to global stability.

The Asian region has a very specific security architecture that is largely based on bi-lateral treaties with the United States, and which almost entirely by-pass Europe although not the United Kingdom. Other EU member states have security relationships with Asian states that are often based on having sold them weapons systems. From

Cambodia to Timor and Aceh, Europe's security role has otherwise been a function of United Nations peace-keeping efforts. Then there are the sideshows, such as the involvement of a few Europeans in the UN-sanctioned Korean armistice commission at Panmunjon or in parts of central Asia, but only Afghanistan can be pointed to as a strong European military presence.

Europe is instead more often seen in Asia as a complementary partner of the United States. Through its own declared preference for regional stability and peace, through EU aid programmes aimed at improving governance and at social goals, and through its understandable inclination to encourage regional integration, Europe's soft power is widely perceived as a complement to the role of the US as a guarantor of hard security. These two distinctly different roles come together on such critical issues as counter-proliferation and region-wide cooperation against terrorism, but in general the US shoulders the burden of providing hard security and thus plays a

strategic role, while Europe's actions fit a much more modest military profile. In a few cases, though, Europe sometimes precedes the United States in forging new relationships, such as with China, and currently with North Korea in the case of many though not all the EU member states, and Europe also expresses a consistent support for peaceful solutions to longstanding disputes and hotspots like the Taiwan straits.

All this is perhaps half the picture, but it is not the grand total of Europe's security stake in Asia, unless you take the view that the region is naturally headed towards a state of collective security. There is a growing list of critical issues that demand greater action by Europe if it is to safeguard its own security by preventing conflict in Asia.

Maritime security is one of these issues, particularly so in South-East Asia whose foreign trade with Europe is now very substantial. Some of the world's busiest sea lanes pass through choke points between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. China and India have, meanwhile, both become maritime powers, yet there is a reluctance to see the US 7th fleet have a higher profile, while the engagement of Japan's naval "self-defence" forces remains very limited. The role that Europe should start to play is to provide security cooperation without any of the strategic implications that an increased US role would involve, while at the same time heading-off the risk of greater military competition between Asian nations.

The Korean peninsula is also a case in point. Nuclear and ballistic missile proliferation, with its linkage to situations such as Iran, is of vital import to Europe.

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To do so, the EU needs first to emphasise its aid contribution

François Godement is right to stressing that Europe must intensify its relations with Asia. The economic rise of China and India will have far reaching consequences for Europe. Not only will Asia be the economic powerhouse of the 21st century, it will also be the world's most conflict-prone region, with nuclear powers that haven't signed the non-proliferation treaty, intense rivalries, lingering territorial disputes and terrorist threats that range from militant religious fundamentalists to left-wing radicals. As Godement points out, these developments will all have a profound impact on Europe's security.

At first sight, Europe and Asia's major powers share the same perceptions of most security challenges. The European Security Strategy identifies terrorism, organised crime, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, failed states and regional conflicts as the main security threats. These aspects are also regarded as the main security challenges by China, Japan and India. Moreover, most Asian countries prefer multilateral strategies to unilateral actions when trying to deal with international problems. These similarities offer some room for closer cooperation between Europe and Asia, and although the ASEM process may not be a perfect forum, it is a starting point in this kind of interregional

The escalation that will follow if this proliferation is not stopped would also have a direct impact on Europe's security. The capacity to apply sanctions and enforce counter-proliferation measures, and to put a restraining agreement into practice, will be crucial. So, too, will be a come-back for the United Nations, which would also imply a greater degree of European responsibility.

Relations across the Taiwan straits are of vital interest to Europe. A military conflict there would have a devastating macro-economic impact on all the developed economies that would be equivalent to, say, a serious interruption of oil supplies. Europe cannot afford to be held hostage to sudden and rash moves that increase tension, and must therefore help both China and Taiwan find their path to peace.

Energy cooperation with Asia has its technical side in terms of improving energy efficiency and developing alternatives, but it also raises geo-political and security concerns. Asia's fast-rising needs have been driving a global scramble for energy resources. The market provides some of the answers, but it is nevertheless critical to ensure that energy competition should not eclipse our concern for promoting good governance, and that energy supply should not be used as a political weapon. Almost all the Asian nations are now energy importers rather than exporters, so setting rules and creating alternative energy sources is of vital interest to Europe as it is to Asia.

Too many of us in Europe nowadays take democracy and due process of law for granted, secure in the knowledge that for Europe these things are no longer

conditioned by the political situation in other parts of the world. Much of Asia has undergone a widening and a deepening of democracy, but other systems still vie with it, in economic if not ideological competition. Facilitating the transition of Asian countries from authoritarian rule is an important and delicate mission, and to forget this would certainly undermine the attractiveness of European values. It would also increase the chances that Europe might one day be viewed as an idealist enclave in a world made-up of power relationships. Common sense dictates that we should help Asia move towards our own democratic norms.

These goals imply a need for guidelines, or at least rules of thumb. The security of our ally, the United States, must not be compromised by European actions, however inadvertent they might be. On the other hand, in a region where dialogue between democracies is now complementing the security alliances of the cold war era, there is clearly room for Europe's independent judgement of crises and its proposals for international solutions. And we should also hope that in future we will see better communication by the US of its own analysis of situations in Asia, and its policy solutions, so that we can better coordinate our actions.

The fundamental balance of Asian geopolitics that has now been achieved after a quarter of a century of hot wars, has to be respected and maintained. We should not condone regional competition between Asia's rising powers, and nor should we endorse any sort of transformational diplomacy if that risks posing a threat to regional peace. This is true even of the abhorrent North Korean regime, and is even

more true of the People's Republic of China –whose integration into the global trading and financial system has not meant political democratisation, and whose economic and social system itself remains fragile by the admission of its own leaders.

Respecting Asia's regional balance while promoting these political and economic norms also means that we Europeans should be deepening our political and security relationships with democracies there such as Japan, South Korea, India, Indonesia and a number of the South East Asian states. This could do much to help shape the whole regional integration process. None of this should be viewed as the formation of an alliance, as the Asian countries want to move away from cold war days. Instead, it should be viewed as conflict prevention.

The fulcrum of Europe's Asia policy will, of course, be our relationship with China. Europe's China policy has had its ups and downs progressing from a mainly commercial and aid relationship to what turned out to be premature dreams of a "strategic partnership". The attempt, and then failure, by Europe to lift the arms embargo in 2003-2004 was a practical lesson on how not to behave: putting the objective before the means, neglecting reciprocity, and on the Chinese side taking Europe for granted.

Dealing with China will be a strong practical test for Europe's common foreign and security policy. It requires a readiness for innovating, a concern to protect our transatlantic policy through dialogue with the US, negotiating skills and above all unity of action when dealing with China – the world's most seasoned negotiator. As a strong

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dialogue. With the inclusion of India, ASEM is the only institution so far with the long-term aim of representing Asia.

The idea of extending Europe's foreign and security policy to Asia also presents problems. Given Europe's limited foreign policy resources, greater concentration would seem to be needed if this is to be successful. Europe's "expectation credibility gap" is already a problem that needs to be narrowed rather than broadened. Europe is unlikely to provide the hard power capability to cope with Asia's various regional security challenges, and even a soft power approach requires capabilities that are still seriously undeveloped.

Europe will not be in a position to pursue its interests in Asia on its own but has to look for potential partners. The EU-led Aceh monitoring mission was a positive example, as the deployment of a European force to monitor the implementation of the Aceh peace agreement in cooperation with ASEAN members showed that common crisis management can work well. A much more negative example was the withdrawal of EU observers from the Sri Lanka monitoring mission in 2006 after the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was listed as a terrorist group.

The debate about an emergence of a "Beijing consensus" shows the necessity for Europe to develop a more coherent strategy for its official development assistance. Otherwise, Europe runs the risk of being pushed to the sidelines. From that perspective, Europe's present engagement with China should be complemented by a coherent strategy to develop similar relations with Japan and India. The rise of China and India will also have an

nation-state that has not yet participated in far-reaching regional integration process, China may at times prefer to deal individually with EU states. Yet many Chinese also understand very well that their country is today being pulled by strong global currents, and has entered an area of economic risk. The European model is attractive, because it balances the market with social concerns and also has the ability to defuse conflicts. Keeping our doors open to China is important if we are to encourage China's own "open door policy". It is therefore a crucially important confidence-building exercise. On the other hand, naiveté such as the continuation of financial aid (as opposed to advice on governance, social management and sectoral development) to the world's fastest growing economy, will not encourage China's transition, but rather will feed into its self-confidence as a new power.

Nowhere is this more true than in the area of national defence. By sheer virtue of its future economic size, China could overwhelm its neighbours and set in motion a chain reaction. Europe should not allow its own peacefulness to be equated by China or any other Asian nations with weakness, and a persistent European dialogue with Beijing should underscore the idea that military power is best used to improve the world order through crisis management, peacekeeping and nation-building. Stabilising the world order at present requires, though, a greater contribution than Europe alone can deploy. China and other international partners should be left in no doubt that Europe is intent on pursuing its alliances to that end. □

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impact on global institutions. Europe should therefore develop a strategy to bring both countries closer to existing global governance structures. If China and India intend to become global economic players, then they should recognise that also means being stakeholders in international affairs.

Europe's soft power rests on its ability to transform economic linkages into peaceful political relationships. Asia's regional economic organisations should be supported in any efforts to develop similar structures. The EU's collaboration with ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) is an important step to strengthen these developments, and Europe's new observer status in SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation), along with China, Japan, and the United States, shows the interest of the international community in promoting regional cooperation in this conflict-prone part of the world. Strengthening regional institutions within Asia and establishing regional and inter-regional governance structures there will also strengthen Asia-Europe relations. □

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