

How do Asians evaluate Europe's strategic involvement in East Asia?

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Abstract Europe is neither in the centre of Southeast Asia's nor of Northeast Asia's strategic interest. For both, Asians and Europeans it has been equally difficult to articulate their visions of each other's role in security matters. However, Asia recognizes positively the EU's civilian dominated approach in peacekeeping missions, e.g. in East Timor or in Aceh. Europe's contribution to the Asia Regional Forum has been rather modest. But due to the increasing importance of comprehensive security, Europe's experiences as a soft power could well change this position, provided both sides pay more attention to the constraints of the two regions. China as the major power in the region is somehow caught between the devil and the deep blue sea: on one side, it neither wants nor expects Europe to play a strategic role in East Asia. On the other, it would like to see Europe to become a power of its own in a China-US-EU triangle.

Preliminary notes

The people of the East Asia region, both masses and elites alike, look foremost up to the United States of America (USA), and this regardless of any political or historical animosities. Educational and cultural links are booming across the Pacific. America is seen as the symbol of modernity and of power, both being goals, East Asians want to achieve as well. English is the lingua franca in East Asia and the large number of East Asian migrants in the US provides an enormous network of contacts.

This paper is based on a speech given by the author in Paris/France on 8th December 2006 at a conference on 'French and European Strategic Interests in East Asia' organised by the 'Asia Centre' with the support of the Secrétariat général de la défense nationale (SGDN).

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Furthermore, Southeast Asian people still look East towards Japan and increasingly to China before turning to Europe. Even the growing role of Australia in that part of the world should not be underestimated.

In 2005, the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) initiated a network of European Studies in Asia. As one of its first activities a study on how the European Union (EU) is perceived in Asia's media was undertaken.

The data were drawn in the first half of 2006 from the daily analysis of four widely accessed media outlets: prime time television news, a daily English paper, a leading popular as well as a business newspaper. Some 4,300 EU news items were identified in the 18 news outlets surveyed in China, Hong Kong, Korea, Singapore and Thailand.

The overall media coverage looks more than limited and the most remarkable finding is that on television prime time news only 106 items on the EU appeared, the majority of them in China. The EU is virtually invisible on the Asian television news and furthermore, three-quarters of the few reports were related to an external view of the EU, e.g. EU's intervention in the Iran nuclear issue and Europe's involvement in Palestine (Holland 2006).

In the 2001 Communication of the Commission of the European Communities entitled 'Europe and Asia: A Strategic Framework for Enhanced Partnerships' http://ec.europa.eu/comm/external_relations/asia/doc/com01_469_en.pdf as well as in the Commission's 'Strategic Paper and Indicative Programme for Multi-Country Programmes in Asia 2005–2006' http://ec.europa.eu/comm/external_relations/asia/rsp/rsp_asia.pdf the first of the six objectives identified is to "contribute to peace and security in the region and globally, through a broadening of our engagement with the region." And to achieve this central objective, the papers state: "We have to strengthen our engagement with Asia in the political and security fields."

However, the definition of Europe's political and security interests in East Asia and the possible EU contribution in this field have proven to be difficult tasks for the Europeans. And East Asian states have at the same time also not been very successful in articulating their vision of a European role.

A number of reasons are given by East Asian partners:

- Different security priorities,
- Different sources of terrorism,
- Different levels of economic and social development,
- Different sovereignty and jurisdiction issues,
- Different means to deal with terror, etc (Kang Choi 2003).

More than 5 years after the EU published its 'Strategic Framework for Enhanced Partnership' the Japanese Ambassador to the EU, stated in a speech in Brugge: "It cannot be denied that, in Europe, there was, until recently, a strong tendency to regard East Asia mainly as an economic market. There was not enough understanding as to the security situation in the region (Kawamura 2006)."

How does East Asia evaluate Europe's strategic role in Asia?

Southeast Asia and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)

The history of the ARF, in which the EU is a member, is, to some extent, one of rejecting European models. From the very beginning, policy makers and academics in Southeast Asia have fiercely resisted any attempts at developing the ARF along the lines of the 'Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe' (OSCE) or the 'North Atlantic Treaty Organization' (NATO).

Several arguments are usually put forward to justify this position:

- Most importantly, many Asians feel that the security environment of their region is quite different from the European one. Many countries in Southeast Asia are still preoccupied with problems of internal stability, economic development and nation building.
- Europe is predominantly land oriented and the Asia Pacific is a maritime region.
- Southeast Asia is widely perceived as being qualitatively more heterogeneous, more diverse and more difficult to organize than Europe.
- Europe benefits from a dense network of regional institutions, while the Asia-Pacific region is still institutionally very thin (Busse and Maull 1999).

It is therefore no surprise when a senior Vietnamese official stated: "The European Union's contribution to the ARF, should be first and foremost, to help the countries of the region to achieve their goal of maintaining long-lasting and positive stability by helping to boost economic development (Pham Cao Phong 2003)."

Indeed, EU's contribution to the ARF has been rather modest, and according to several Southeast Asian members, Europe should first of all resolve its own foreign policy commitment and leadership questions if it wants to be an effective and active partner of the ARF. EU's accession to the 'Treaty of Amity and Co-operation in Southeast Asia' in the face of France's decision to sign also on its own, is just one example given (Abad 2006).

On the positive side, the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), in which most East Asian states are members, is increasingly seen as an important strategic platform to pursue common international and regional developments—without US interference. The ARF recognizes the EU's support in several Asian conflicts: e.g. the Korean Peninsula, East Timor and Aceh. Southeast Asians appreciate Europe's 'soft power' and civilian dominated approach in EU peace keeping missions in Asia. The Asian members of the ARF are pleased by the participation of the 'EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy' in the annual ARF meetings. It is seen as a great leap forward compared to the former representation by local EU member-state ambassadors. However, reading the last two 'Chairman's Statements' the word 'Europe' appears only by recognising the EU for co-chairing the Intersessional Group on Confidence Building Measures and Preventive Diplomacy.

Northeast Asia: China, Japan, Korea

In Chinese opinion, compared with China–US, China–Japan and China–Russia relations, the China–EU relationship has obviously the advantage of less historic disputes and current conflicts and is characterised by Chinese leaders with steadiness, pragmatism and maturity, seeing both partners as new emerging forces, who are facing the pressure of the US’s sole supremacy and therefore strongly advocate multilateralism. On the other hand, for China, Europe is still far away from overcoming its manifold dependencies on the US and far away from reaching a consensus on whether it should become a power of its own in a China–US–EU triangle.

Northeast Asian leaders view the EU as a useful economic partner and a factor for stability, but not as a partner in security affairs. In March 2005 the Chinese periodical ‘International Studies’ stated: “The two sides lack any need of each other and let alone depend on each other for Asian-Pacific strategic security (Huo Zhengde 2005).” In 2002, Kay Möller came to the same conclusion by asserting that China neither wants nor expects Europe to play a role in East Asia (Möller 2002).

China also worries, that a closer China–EU strategic co-operation will arouse suspicion from the US and might add complexity to the China–US relationship. China will therefore continue to persist firmly on non-exclusiveness.

China appreciates, that the EU lays in its policy on China more importance to its global strategy and economic interests than to ideology, but at the same time China still notes that Europe has not yet given up its attempt to ‘westernize’ and ‘disintegrate’ China (Huo Zhengde 2005).

As far as Taiwan is concerned, China sees the EU’s involvement, which supports ‘neither Taiwan’s independence nor military conflicts across the Taiwan Strait’ not as deep as that of the US, but predicts in case of a Taiwan Strait or a China–US conflict, potentially, the EU will not possibly stand by China (Huo Zhengde 2005).

China’s bilateral relations with each EU member and especially France, Great Britain and Germany, still serve as the base of its multilateral relationship with Europe.

Regular summits between the EU and Northeast Asian states have contributed to a better understanding between the two regions:

In September 2005, the first Japan–EU Dialogue on the East Asian Security Environment was held, followed by a second Dialogue June 2006. It coincided with a period when the EU’s possible lifting of its arms embargo against China was becoming a major issue in Europe. Japan strongly conveyed the message to the EU that in view of the security situation in Asia, a lifting of the embargo should not take place. The Japanese Ambassador to the EU assessed in his mentioned speech in Brugge, that through these dialogues, the EU has come to a better understanding of the security situation in East Asia (Kawamura 2006).

Alongside the last ASEM in Helsinki, on 9 September 2006, the Ninth EU–China Summit and the Third EU–Korea Summit took place. The Chinese side, contrary to the Japanese position, reiterated its view that lifting the arms embargo would be conducive to the sound development of EU–China relations and urged the EU to lift the arms embargo at an early date (Joint Statement of the Ninth EU–China Summit 2006).

South Korea’s President Roh Moo-Hyun recognised that the enlarged EU provides valuable sources of reference for regional cooperation based on a community of law and a community of values (Joint press statement: EU–Republic of Korea Summit

2006). Neither the EU, nor any EU member state is taking part in the 'Six Party Talks' to find a peaceful resolution to the security concerns raised by the North Korean nuclear weapons program. However the EU participated in the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organisation (KEDO) Light Water Reactor project which has been formally terminated in 2006. It is recalled that the participation of the EU in the KEDO program in 1997 was mainly a response to Japan's demand. It was then the quid pro quo for Japanese support to the reconstruction of former Yugoslavia.

Some signs of changes in East Asia's perception of Europe

Some of the experiences and best practices being shared by European states are recently seen as useful by the ARF. For example, the EU's Troika system has found its way into the concept of the ARF's Friends of the Chair. The Oslo Guidelines on the use of military and civil defence assets in disaster relief, the Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons, the OSCE counterterrorism measures, among others, have been helpful for the ARF to devise its own co-operative activities relevant to the Asia Pacific region (Abad 2006).

The ASEAN of late has displayed an appetite for more formal institutionalization. In late 2005, contrary to the often heard rejections by key ASEAN leaders during the values debate of the 1990s, Singapore's foreign minister, George Yeo, called for greater attention to lessons of early European economic integration, so has Singapore's Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew who, during his visits in May 2006 to China, Japan and Korea, stated the EU-model of integration as being instructive for East Asia (See Seng Tan 2006).

As part of the envisioned ASEAN-Community, Southeast Asian leaders agreed to establish an ASEAN Security Community (ASC). The ASC should enhance peace, stability, democracy and prosperity in the region and recognises the strong interdependence between political, economic and social stability. This comprehensive security concept is a clear departure from the region's traditional security outlook. For ASEAN members, the EU with its characteristics of a 'soft power' has definitely more authority to assist, than other powers, such as the United States, whose actions, however well-meaning, are viewed also in East Asia with increased suspicion, pessimism and resentment.

In several track-two conferences Asian participants identified two main areas to which Europe and the EU could contribute in East Asia:

- Firstly, Europe could be a source of inspiration in peacekeeping. The Blue Helmet concept, under the auspices of the United Nations, has been developed by the Europeans since the 1950s, as they took part massively in peacekeeping operations in conflict zones in Africa, Latin America and Asia.
- Secondly, Europe could make meaningful contributions to anti-terror campaigns, which countries in the Asia-Pacific region could be facing more and more in the coming years. In fact, the anti-terror experience of the European is far richer than that of the United States, Australia or Canada (Teo Chu Cheow 2003).

Conclusion

No doubt, Europe is not in the centre of East Asia's security interests.

However, at a closer look, one notices that East Asian partners are increasingly interested and involved in areas and issues of security co-operation with Europe. The strengthened presence of the EU in the ARF and the increasing number of summits and meetings between partners from East Asia and Europe are some form of proof for this thesis. Europe's East Asian partners agree that new transnational security challenges have to be addressed jointly—but how, is still largely left open. Security cooperation between Asia and Europe continues to be rather abstract and lacking in substance.

Finally: Europe and East Asia have to pay more attention to the constraints inherent in the nature of the EU as an institution and in the nature of the newly rising regionalism in East Asia. Failure to do so will create the risk that discussions between Europe and East Asia will remain at the lofty level of 'common' or 'shared' interests, which are potentially infinite (Robles 2003).

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