

Towards stronger EU-Asia relations

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Summary¹

The EU and its member states are designing differing strategies to engage with Asia and its various regional processes that could be made to complement each other if they were to be developed from a common outlook. More links between dynamic politicians, administrators, businesses and intellectuals in Europe and Asia are always welcome, but sectors such as education and communication have a greater potential to reach even local communities. All of this must be done in reasoned cooperation with the US, as it is still the only power able to lead broad coalitions to curb the more worrying aspects of regimes like China. In a decade of diminishing budget expectations, it is necessary to ensure a smarter combination of the assets of public and private actors wherever they may be.

World power is indeed shifting to the East

In the past, the lack of global governance prompted military counterbalances between groups of countries, and powerful ones tended to dominate weaker ones in their spheres of influence. During the Cold War, the US established clientelistic alliances in Asia, but agreed on engagement rules and multilateral institutions with Western Europe. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US tried to enlarge its hub-and-spoke system of imperial relationships towards Western Asia, but as its unipolar moment came to an end with the rise of more regional powers and global networks, the US preferred promoting a liberal law-based global order. As world power shifts back from the Atlantic to a vast and conflicting Asia, more public and private actors are learning to co-determine this decade's search for better laws of global order. While neither mainland China nor its main allies can or want to propose a viable alternative, they can either help responsibly or derail current efforts to upgrade the existing system.

China has become a great source of hope as its rapid modernisation has lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty. Although there are signs of economic deceleration as its productivity is modest and some foreign firms are divesting, China is promoting greater domestic consumption, and its predicted growth rate until 2020 is still multiplying Europe's. Thus, the rest of the world tries to find new ways to join China. Japanese *keiretsu* and South Korean *chaebol* keep investing in China despite difficult political quarrels. Meanwhile, South-East Asia, Mongolia, Australia, Iran, Russia, much of Latin America and Africa ship large amounts of natural resources, often with the support of Chinese capital and labour. On the other hand, China buys companies and bonds in Southern Europe, and plans high-speed trains to reach to Central Europe via Central Asia.

Yet, China has also become a source of concern. More countries in Asia's periphery are democratising, but a richer China is still ruled by an unelected Communist party and its external strategy largely set by seemingly unaccountable armed forces. This symbiosis benefits mainly a few on the top and tries to steer people's minds from democratic politics.

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Moreover, it is creating widespread insecurity. Island disputes are already fuelling tensions with the US and its allies. Fights for water rights in China's South are brewing. Divisions between ASEAN members (Cambodia recently sided with China) are diverting regional efforts to enhance institutional, economic and socio-cultural cooperation. A potential strategic rapprochement between China and Russia, and the ambivalent growth of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation evoke the Cold War.

Hence, the US is surrounding China, partly cooperatively, partly competitively. President Bush, besides having invaded Iraq, and having led a large coalition to tame Afghanistan, has also reached to India hoping to link it to its Pacific allies. President Obama now hopes to advance major Trans-Pacific and Trans-Atlantic economic agreements (TPP & TAFTA) and generally enhance diplomatic and development cooperation with friends and allies. But he is also inducing Europe to be more effective in addressing strategic problems at least in its near abroad, and is enhancing the US network of military alliances east and south of China.

So, wake up, Europe!

In the second half of the 20th century, Europe's secular security problem was largely solved with US support. Having tried to reduce the main geopolitical tensions in the Islamic world, the US is now pivoting towards East Asia, and is waiting for Europe to resolve its current crisis and help consolidate a global liberal order.

The EU did gradually develop some civilian power tools under the US security umbrella. It has become the main aid donor and promoter of development projects, it loudly upholds human rights, and globally backs many detailed economic regulations and technical standards. But Europe's hard power was only occasionally ventured in its near abroad and with very limited success. The EU has lacked coordinated action to resolve problems in North Africa and the Middle East, or an energy policy towards Russia, and some member states' efforts to reduce tensions around Iran's nuclear program have largely failed.

The EU's external projection towards a broader Asia was even weaker as member states advanced distinct approaches. The UK, the special ally of the US, did have a global security mind-set that has seduced France but Germany remains content being a trade power. Spain's plans towards *Asia-Pacífico* focused on bureaucratic trips and cultural issues, but Sweden's Asian strategies highlighted development projects and security dialogues. In this fragmented context the EU Councils only produced weak common statements, and the European Commission had little funding to advance bilateral and sub-regional Asia strategies to enhance economic and political development and linkages. The prolonged economic and political crises have damaged Europe's attempts to sustain its incipient efforts in Asia. So the EU, hardly a regional power, needs to fully awake and, in tandem with the liberal West, make sure that a rising China and other powers in Asia keep reforming and take responsibilities in promoting a more viable global order.

However, the EU's recent foreign policy does seem to slowly progress even towards Asia. Some members are tackling problems in the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean and the Sahel, the EU's economic policy toward Russia is becoming more effective and Asia has caught the attention of more EU leaders. Bilateral links are becoming substantial as many European member states are rushing to enhance economic exchanges with the many Asian growing economies to seek relief from their domestic worries. For instance, Spain no longer puts forward verbose plans towards *Asia-Pacífico*, but it aims at comprehensive and flexible global strategies. The EU is advancing talks for more free trade with some ASEAN members and India. But a recently agreed preferential trade agreement between the EU and nimble South Korea has induced pragmatism in other strategic partnerships. After two decades of cordial but shallow discussions and modest action on many topics, the EU and Japan have agreed to negotiate a deep economic partnership while trying to cooperate in many other issues under shared values and principles.

Meanwhile, although the EU had first envisaged a special partnership with China to balance the US and Russia, that relationship is now more nuanced to accommodate divergences over approaches to civil and political rights without derailing good economic relations. Yet the EU should make much more of an effort to help China's huge state bureaucracy enhance the rule of law. Chinese elites understand the need for further modernisation, and are internally debating and often testing options to enhance local democracy and land management, decrease corruption and the privileges of enterprises, move to more productive sectors and protect IPRs. And, arguably, the EU should study the Chinese regime further to find out how it can learn a lesson or two in promoting long-term development.

Bi-regional links should also be enhanced with caution as there are various emerging regional dialogue and cooperation processes in Asia. ASEAN is still the most comprehensive and promising for Europe in terms of values, so the EU keeps supporting ASEAN's development plans and has recently signed its Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. If ASEAN regains cohesion and strength, the EU may want to hold summits to advance beyond the current plan of action, and appoint special envoys and the like to consolidate South-East Asia as a model of cooperation in a broader Asia. The EU could discreetly help revive discussions in and around the Korean peninsula while recalling Europe's successful experiences in handling reconciliation. It could try inducing poor Central Asian autocracies to trade water for hydrocarbons. And it should make sure that smart Indian elites stop bullying their neighbours and focus on improving the investment climate to profit from the many knowledge sectors India could export beyond computing software.

The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) has become a large, flexible platform for many countries to talk and cooperate in variable geometries. The European Council and External Action Service are now coordinating the European positions, including those of Switzerland and Norway. To help organise Europe's variegated counterparts, future ASEM summits in Asia should be testing grounds for a broader multi-level multilateralism. ASEM-13 in 2020 could try to gather all relevant bilateral, regional, interregional and other gatherings with influence in Asia: the ASEAN, ASEAN+3/6/8 and ARF, the APEC leaders' summit, the G-20

and other G's, and perhaps a special session of the UN and Bretton Woods organisations might convene in succession in one or more serene localities in Asia, or perhaps at sea.

ASEM could also entice those and other multilateral organisations from the Mediterranean to the Pacific to meet when needed to address difficult strategic concerns. Along the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Russia's CSTO, the Asian Cooperation Dialogue, the Asian Development Bank, the Arab League, the Organisation for the Islamic Conference and the like, ASEM could aim to stabilise the vortex of global geopolitics around Afghanistan as NATO withdraws. Such exploratory exercises could stimulate best practices and help co-evolve EU-Asia relations in the ecology of regional and global multi-level multilateralism. A new generation of international organisations would then more easily adapt to a world more replete with relevant actors, public and private.

Catalysing people's energies

Democratic regimes take many forms, but good ones are generally required to not only provide jobs and security, but also to inform and educate citizens, allowing them to evict harmful elites and promote happier social interactions under predictable rules and laws. Regular contested elections, competitive markets, widespread education, inquisitive media and civic protests may sometimes be unwelcome, but they help disinfect rotten regimes and reduce their will to attack other countries. So, most of Europe and North America have learnt to be governed by a plurality of public and private actors that have weaved many transnational networks.

And many of these Western actors have spurred counterparts in other parts of the world, thus having created the prospects of consolidating a fluid global governance in economic, social and even security fields. Many people across Asia indeed also value those ideals. Elections keep influencing political regimes, even in Japan and Singapore. The rise of a large middle class and the poverty of still many are gradually pressuring more autocratic rulers to become accountable. As China upgrades, a domino effect among its uncertain Asian allies would likely soon ensue.

The EU's 2003 security strategy should thus soon be upgraded and complemented with a global civil strategy that catalyses particular strategies between actors at all levels from European institutions to national and sub-national governments and down to the plethora of people that want to link to promote prosperity in peace. The EU and Asian counterparts should provide an environment that enhances physical and electronic exchanges between parliamentarians, ministries, regulatory agencies, judges, political parties, media, universities, businesses, organised religions, social NGOs, tourists and popular movements. But catalysers should be prioritised.

Parliamentarians and politicians from Europe and Asia have occasionally met, but these linkages should be enhanced at many levels, from Brussels down to national and local centres of parliamentary activity. It might be particularly interesting to explore gatherings of EU families of political parties and the International Conference of Asian Political Parties

which for over a decade has promoted annual meetings of legislators in the whole range of Asian regimes.

Yet parliamentary democracy in our times of instant electronic communication needs to be complemented with a healthy media and learning environment. European and Asian televisions and news agencies should present more news and analysis on a global scale. Visual tools like maps and graphs should complement the work of more, and more prepared, presenters. So-called track-2 processes of think-tanks and experts can provide leadership. But broader people-to-people exchanges should be targeted in Europe's civil strategies at the EU and member state levels, and the recent agreement to start EU-China people's exchanges quickly substantiated to become an example to the meagre intellectual links between the EU and India. More young people should be travelling, studying, socialising in Asia or with Asia anywhere in the world. Enhancing educational exchange programs is always important, but greater value is to be found in further globalising faculty, administrators and content taught at all levels of knowledge, from primary schools to universities and onto advanced research institutions.

European and Asian countries and regional organisations could globally excel in global multi-level linkages by creating unique synergies between info-communications and education technologies and services. One could set up a public news service that would distribute to existing media, and even broadcast on its own, public information presented through dynamic maps, like TV weather forecasts or virtual globes based on big data, with zooming capabilities and other visual tools that facilitate recognising mutual synergies and the joint contribution of Europe and East Asia to the world. Public access to textual, visual and multimedia information on most supranational issues in the new age of global databases and search engines is no longer a technical problem. Public dissemination of synthetic maps with interconnected graphs and tables has become very affordable through new geographic information software. Synthesising and delivering such broad knowledge could easily be done by a mix of think-tanks, media and academic experts developing media programmes and academic curricula that promote appreciation and cooperation among cultures and civilisations.

Good ideas will not advance without adequate budget allocations. Although the EU is exploring new ways to raise revenues, the EU institutions will suffer a reduction in its next multi-annual framework budget. Yet the European area remains the richest economy of the world, so the budget priorities of different public and private actors should be more clearly discussed by officials and concerned citizens to find synergies. Lightly armed forces and aid workers should sometimes be capable to quickly reach deep even in Asia to reduce tensions with potentially large ramifications. Even the budgets of local communities should have a more global dimension. For instance, aging agricultural communities in Europe could receive funds devoted to revive themselves by welcoming a variety of immigrant workers from Asia that also help export food surpluses back to Asia. And unemployed European construction workers could be enticed to help build greener Asian cities.

Conclusions

To many the world seems in great disarray and the liberal West should prepare more for conflicts with rising powers. Nuclear capabilities are indeed booming from the Mediterranean to the Pacific, a large stretch of land where the main military tensions of the world are concentrated. So some in the EU may prefer reconstructing an Atlantic space in which North and South America, Europe and, perhaps, Africa join forces against much of the rest. But a growing West should not just look south and ignore or fear the east all the way to the Pacific, for a global division between East and West is a false dichotomy. In fact, the world is undergoing a natural, healthy crisis as the basic liberal parameters are assimilated widely also in Asia. In particular, as China becomes a more responsible power, other rising powers in Asia will also feel they can profit from a global liberal system that allows them to even lead in various functional areas.

The interest of the EU is not to concoct recurrent verbose strategies towards Asia nor to envisage a special EU-Asia relationship. Such approach would be futile because European and Asian actors have often diverging interests that require reasoned negotiations, and because there are too many security, political, economic, social, cultural and ecological issues that can only be addressed more globally. Thus, Europe should manage to galvanise its regional institutions and the member states' public and private actors at various levels of governance to jointly enhance complementary global visions in which Europe and Asia are properly highlighted within a complexly interdependent world. We should soon channel the adrenaline accumulated in solving Europe's economic crisis to move on more smartly onto a world in which Asia actually holds half of the sky.