

# The Absent Stabilizer? Europe and East Asian Security Dynamics

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As the U.S. undertakes a “pivot” towards Asia, publicly reorienting its policies to the Asia-Pacific region, regional security questions in East Asia have once again risen to the top of the global agenda. But conspicuously absent from this discussion is Europe that has yet to formulate a coherent and comprehensive strategy towards East Asia and in particular the strategic challenges the region presents. In an attempt to understand Europe’s potential role in East Asian security better, this article will first draw an outline around current EU security relations in the region, highlight the EU’s role and activity within the context of Taiwan, North Korea and the South China Sea (the three main hot-button regional security topics) before concluding looking at the impact of Europe’s current security posture in East Asia.

## A BRIEF HISTORY

EXACTLY A week before the September 11, 2001, the European Commission published a communication entitled “Europe and Asia: A Strategic Framework for Enhanced Partnerships.” Intended to provide an outline for Europe’s engagement with a region that stretches “from Afghanistan in the west to Japan

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in the east, and from China in the north to New Zealand in the south,” the paper laid out a strategy for European engagement in Asia covering everything from security, trade and investment, promoting prosperity, protecting human rights and spreading good governance, building global partnerships, to “strengthening the awareness of Europe in Asia (and vice versa).” Ambitious in its scope, though low on strategic detail, it was largely shelved in the wake of the September 11 attacks that refocused global attention on international terrorism and the Middle East as the foreground of international security. This was reflected in the December 2003 European Security Strategy in which the overwhelming focus was non-traditional security threats, threats from international terrorism, Africa and the Middle East. Where Asia did feature, it was largely South and Central Asia. The Korean Peninsula is mentioned briefly, North Korea as a source of threatening “nuclear activity” and in concluding the ESS highlights the need “to develop strategic partnerships, with Japan, China, Canada and India.”

The main forum for European engagement with East Asia comes through the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) format, an “informal process of dialogue and co-operation bringing together the 27 European Union Member States and the European Commission with 19 Asian countries and the ASEAN Secretariat.” Meeting biannually alternatively between Europe and Asia for Head of State Summits, the structure is complemented by a series of minister level meetings and senior official meetings providing European and Asian leaders with a format through which to engage on issues of mutual interest. This process supplements EU-ASEAN engagement through the ASEAN Regional Forum framework, theoretically giving the EU a voice at the table in East Asian security. Over the years, EU members have hosted high level discussions on the security implications of climate change (Brussels, November 2010); preventive diplomacy and confidence building (Berlin, March 2008 and a year earlier in Helsinki); disaster relief (Helsinki, October 2007); and Energy Security (Brussels, October 2006).

While supposedly one of the foci of attention, very little actual work and few statements are made about strategic security questions. Regular Foreign Minister level summits issue declarations that

include mentions of the current situation in Afghanistan, the Middle East, international terrorism or piracy, but it is only the Korean Peninsula that merits a regular mention in terms of immediate East Asian security questions. In this regard, in the wake of ASEM 3 (October 2000 in Seoul) and ASEM 4 (September 2002 in Copenhagen), the leaders issued “Declarations for Peace on the Korean Peninsula.” In the wake of the North Korean nuclear test of May 25, 2009, during the ASEM Foreign Minister’s meeting in Hanoi, ASEM issued a declaration “condemning” the move by the DPRK. There is little evidence, however, that any of this has had much of a demonstrable effect on the security situation in the Korean peninsula, with one prominent European academic characterizing EU engagement on the issue in late 2009 as “relative inactivity.”

In fact, since the turn of the century, it is hard to discern much of a security strategic component to Europe’s engagement with East Asia. The one clear break from this tradition came in 2003 when the EU started to consider the possibility of lifting its arms embargo with China. Led primarily by leaders in France and Germany, the push to lift the embargo came at a time when transatlantic relations were in an awkward moment in the wake of the American-led decision to invade Iraq and there was an eagerness in Europe and Beijing to try to create a counter-balance to the unipolar American world. This also came during period in which the EU started to recognize that China was rapidly becoming its largest trading partner in the world and having it on a list of disreputable states that included Belarus, Sudan and Zimbabwe was not an accurate reflection of the bilateral relationship.

But the decision to try to lift the embargo (initially imposed in 1989 in the wake of the shooting of protesters in Tiananmen Square) was handled badly, with some member states eager to move it forwards, while others resisted. In the end, the EU prevaricated for a few years, before finally shelving the decision in May 2005 in response to the Chinese anti-secession law that seemed to directly threaten Taiwanese independence. The net result of this entire experience, however, was to merely strengthen suspicion towards the EU as an actor in East Asian regional security. Washington was a flurry of anger as they saw Europe moving to interfere in

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a region that they traditionally perceived as their backyard, while Japan and Taiwan did not appreciate the seemingly direct threat to their security that was implicit within arming a potential regional adversary. Within Europe, however, the discussion over the embargo did focus attention somewhat on the need for greater European thinking and strategic planning in East Asian affairs. In an attempt to

demonstrate to regional allies that it was eager to play a constructive role in regional affairs, the EU established a dialogue on East Asian Security with the U.S. in 2004 and Japan in 2005. Though, as has been noted, it is possible that the effect of these forums was to merely institutionalize American and Japanese resistance to the EU ever lifting its arms embargo.

#### TAIWAN, NORTH KOREA AND SOUTH CHINA SEA

SINCE THEN, there has been little movement from a EU perspective towards developing a stronger regional security presence, or one that is particularly distinct from the United States. While some individual member states have strong security interests and links in the broader East Asian region, the EU as a whole has been put into a backseat position when it comes to exploring a greater role for itself in the regional security architecture. Players like Japan and the United States see European meddling as a potentially destabilizing factor, while China rapidly lost interest in developing Europe as an ally in an alternative strategic pole that could help advance Chinese interests. Instead, China and Japan have focused on the EU as a trade partner (and increasingly as an investment opportunity), while the United States under President Obama has lost patience with European indecision focusing his energies on building links in the increasingly prosperous East. Unlike previous Presidents with experience of the Cold War for whom the Transatlantic relationship

was a partnership that needed to be venerated and Europe a potential battlefield, President Obama and his administration see Europe's failings and are no longer willing to simply pander for history's sake.

But this one-dimensional vision of Europe as an impotent security actor and player in East Asia is something that misses the whole picture of European regional engagement, and in particular the positive role that Europe could play in improving regional stability. To focus on three recent case studies of regional security questions in turn: Taiwan, North Korea and the South China Sea.

### *Taiwan*

ON A VISIT TO a series of Taiwanese universities last year, the author was surprised to find a public opinion of the EU that was deeply concerned that the current discussion about China potentially bailing Europe out was something that could result in the EU deciding to lift its arms embargo to China and thus directly threaten Taiwan. Concerns that when presented to European officials were dismissed. The EU is in fact a quite active supporter and investor in Taiwan. According to official figures, the EU is the biggest foreign investor in Taiwan (ahead of the United States), with a total FDI of \$1.2 billion in 2010. Additionally, Taiwanese passport holders have visa-free travel to Europe within the Schengen zone, a luxury not afforded to their mainland counterparts. And when China announced its "anti-secession law" of May 2005 that seemed directed at clamping down on moves towards greater Taiwanese independence, it was seen as the final block in the EU's cogitations about lifting their arms embargo to China. Then in 2008, the EU decided to establish a EU-Taiwan Information Center, a platform for greater exchange between the EU and Taiwan, an initiative only undertaken within Asia in Japan, Korea, Singapore and New Zealand. At the harder end of relations, some European contractors have become involved in arms sales or contracts with Taiwan, though the overwhelming majority of Taiwanese weapons are purchased from the United States.

In a more public display, the European Parliament continues to be a source of strong support to Taiwan, regularly publishing

documents and sending delegations supporting Taipei. Mid last year thanks to the efforts of a few Parliamentarians, the EP adopted a resolution that “strongly supports” the establishment of a EU-Taiwan Free Trade Agreement (FTA). While not legally binding, the resolution was followed in September by a debate on the issue and official meetings between the EC and Taiwanese officials to discuss the possibility.

While none of this demonstrates an intense security attention towards Taiwan, it does highlight the EU’s interests in the island and its willingness to support the island in its stand off against China. While Europe officially recognizes “one China” and “does not support Taiwan membership in international organizations which require statehood,” it does see Taiwan as an “industrial democracy” and its decision to grant a visa waiver to Taiwanese passport holders as part of a larger regional strategy. All of which shows a strategy towards Taiwan that is nuanced and not simply secondary to the United States or China’s respective policies towards the island. From a European perspective, there is a sense that there is no point in advancing the recognition of Taiwan too far, as this would simply aggravate the situation with Beijing, something that would end up with negative repercussion for all involved. Instead, small moves are made that advance relations and demonstrate a commitment to the island without aggravating the overall situation across the Straits.

### *North Korea*

WHEN LOOKING at the Korean Peninsula, the EU is largely disregarded as an actor. The *pro forma* statements issued during ASEM Summits reflect a comment made to the author by an EEAS official who reported that in their experience Chinese officials were unsure why they had to talk to Europe about their views on the Six Party Talks. From this diplomat’s perspective, China was unsure about why the EU had a role in hearing about the talks and certainly this understanding is not deepened by official European statements along the lines of that given to the press by EU High Representative and Vice Commissioner Catherine Ashton in the wake of Kim Jong-il’s death in which she pointed out that the EU was “monitoring the situation.” According to the EU’s official sites,

the last country strategy paper the EU issued with regards DPRK was in March 2002, a time of great optimism about North Korea from a European perspective. As then-EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana put it, “The European Union had joined an agreement initiated by the two Koreas and the U.S. within the Korean Energy Development Organization program, the objective being to persuade North Korea to freeze and later dismantle its nuclear program. In exchange, two light-water nuclear reactors would be built to generate electric energy, and 500,000 metric tons of oil would be supplied annually until the first reactor began operating. In turn, the EU initiated an extensive humanitarian aid project. The talks with Kim Jong-il and his collaborators seemed promising.”

This all turned to ash in 2003 when North Korea withdrew from the Non-proliferation regime, leading to a suspension of all European efforts towards the nation. Not invited in to the Six Party Talk format for unclear reasons, the EU was left on the sidelines of the discussions, but joined the rest of the world in condemning North Korea when in 2006 it conducted its first nuclear test. Having expressed this position, the EU moved to try to engage further and after the announcement in February 2007 that Pyongyang would move to disable its facilities, Solana was reported as having stated that the “EU wanted to be a player and not a payer in any final accounting.” A declaration sounded like it would presage greater engagement but resulted in little further movement.

Since this point, there has not been much evidence of movement from the perspective of the EU taking on a greater role in the Six Party Talks or bringing stability to the Korean Peninsula. The EU has issued periodic statements in response to activity on the Peninsula, including on the breakdown of talks in December 2008, the launch by DPRK of a communications satellite, the decision to expel IAEA inspectors, the sinking of the *Cheonan*, the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, and most recently the death of Kim Jong-il. In between there have been occasional delegation visits to Pyongyang and some member states maintain aid programs, but largely speaking there has been little contact between Pyongyang and Brussels.

The decision to remain outside the Six Party framework and more broadly the discussion about North Korea is not one that the EU appears to have consciously made. But lacking a major security presence in the region, and the fact that the talks started in 2003 when the EU was beginning to consider lifting its arms embargo with China (and thus just before a period of tension with its Asian and American counterparts), it is unsurprising that the EU has remained locked out of the process. While non-proliferation remains an active concern of the EU, a lack of a formal role, either within the Six Party framework or ASEM means that the EU lacks much opportunity to engage. As a Chinese academic told the author in late 2009, “Anyway, East Asia is our concern, Iran is yours.” The point being that in non-proliferation terms, the EU should focus on the Iranian question that posed a more direct threat to European security.

### *South China Sea*

A FINAL AREA to touch upon within the context of East Asian security issues is the recent troubles over the South China Sea (SCS) seaspace, and the adjacent problems of island ownership between China and neighbors like Japan. In the past few years there has been a noticeable increase in regional tensions around these islands that have slowly internationalized these very regional problems. Bound by treaty obligations and lingering concerns about increasing Chinese power, the United States has found itself increasingly involved, while the European Union has found itself absent from the discussion.

Unlike the Korean Peninsula question and the Six Party Talks, there is no clear regional framework through which the EU could attempt to engage in the South China Sea disputes. Also, unlike the Taiwan question where the EU has accumulated a relatively coherent line over time, the SCS question is one that involves a complex series of regional relationships that the EU as a whole has not developed in an advanced enough fashion yet. Furthermore, given the United States strong local security presence, the natural tendency of most states is to engage directly with the United States or China as their primary ally.



However, the EU has sought to play a far more active role in the question, using its relatively novel presence on the subject as a springboard for advancing engagement on the issue. In November 2011, the EEAS's Southeast Asia Division deputy head Philippe van Amersfoort offered, "as this strategic situation develops, the EU may be a useful element of balance. EU is ready to play a role of mediation." This was supplemented by a presentation in Manila by prominent European expert Fraser Cameron who pointed out the many instances of sea sharing and resolution instances that the EU has learned from that could offer experiences East Asia could learn from.

Currently, it remains unclear whether this suggested role is one that the region will seek advice from or whether the EU will continue to be shut out of the South China Sea issues. Certainly, lacking the U.S.'s regional military interests and treaty alliances with powers like Vietnam and the Philippines or Japan's direct interests, it is doubtful that the EU can force itself into a role. But the regional instability that the tensions generate are destabilizers in a region that the EU is reliant on both for great volumes of trade and increasing investment. China, Japan and the United States are the EU's largest trading partners—security tensions between them are a direct threat to this market. Additionally, European powers like France and the United Kingdom have substantial maritime forces and strong links to regional shipping that mean a more robust role could be adopted to supplement a diplomatic brokering role.

### *What Role for the EU in East Asia?*

AS WE HAVE SEEN, thus far, the EU has played something of a limited security role in East Asian affairs. From this brief overview, we can see how Europe has established some networks for connections with East Asian security affairs, but so far failed to capitalize on them to find an appropriate role. ASEM and the EU's participation in ARF have not resulted in an enhanced regional presence, with the EU thus far focusing on engaging on broad international thematic issues through the forums—with repeated statements in ASEM on the Korean Peninsula as the exception.

Where the EU has engaged, it has been largely viewed with suspicion as regional powers question its role and major outside players express irritation at perceived interference. The legacy of the arms embargo debacle casts a shadow over regional security questions as the United States, Japan and Taiwan all see potential European disloyalty merely an arms sale away. And on the other side of the coin, the impossibility of actually lifting the embargo highlights to China that Europe's loyalties lie elsewhere and that ultimately it remains a relatively impotent actor in international security affairs.

But this bleak assessment rather misses some of the natural advantages and successes that have emerged from Europe's engagement with East Asia. With the Taiwan question, the EU has managed to strike a balance that has increased the EU's connections and trade with Taiwan, while also maintaining cordial relations with Beijing. While Taipei remains a bone of contention—as recently as February 23, 2012 Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei “urged countries to not develop official ties” with Taiwan. This came as a senior Taiwanese official visited Germany, France and Belgium seeking to advance talks on the ECA with the EU. However, adding some nuance to the declaration, Hong stated, “We don't oppose the countries who have established diplomatic relationship with us promoting non-government economic, trade and cultural activities with Taiwan region.” An approach that leaves scope for European (and others) engagement with Taiwan and might reflect a sense of improving cross-Straits relations. Possibly reinforcing this interpretation, an EEAS official told the author that they were surprised that Taiwan and a restatement of “One China” did not come up during the most recent EU-China Summit earlier in February 2012 in Beijing. Reflecting on previous Summits, the official noted that this subject was frequently a focus of intensive debate, while now it was conspicuously absent from the Chinese side.

With regards security issues around the Korean Peninsula, Europe's absent role is one that has been reinforced by having no seat at the table in the Six Party Talks. While it would be difficult for the EU to inject itself within the process at this late stage, it might be

possible for the EU to try to play a role on the supportive side using its “soft power” tools to support harder American-led negotiations. As was noted, the EU did establish some aid programs, though a suspension of relations in the wake of North Korean withdrawal from the NPT meant that they were suspended. Specific member states also run individual aid projects in the country, and even during suspended relations, the EU held a number of bilateral training conferences in Pyongyang.

All of this adds up to a picture into which the parameters of a European contribution could be mapped. As Stockholm-based American expert Bates Gill put it to the British House of Lords, “Some member states with an active diplomatic presence play a role [in] providing information, insight and understanding to allies about developments in North Korea.” And this contact and information can be translated into a more active role into which Javier Solana’s desire for the EU to shift from being a “payer” to being a “player” comes true. Given the current potential opening that is offered by the passing of the late leader Kim Jong-il, it is possible that the time is ripe for some form of enhanced global engagement on the Korean Peninsula and the EU would do well to ensure it profits from this opening by engaging in a more comprehensive and focused fashion.

Finally, with regards SCS, it seems highly unlikely that the EU will end up playing much of a direct role. Its offer to mediate seems to have gone ignored, but the case studies in seaborder dispute resolution that the European experience offer are something that would be an unfortunate potential miss for East Asia. Disputes over fishing waters, underwater exploration rights, contradictory historical maps laying out different claims and seaborders are all issues that the EU has faced in its past and a close examination of some of the lessons learned are something that East Asia would likely benefit from.

## CONCLUSION

As EUROPEAN expert Dr Nicola Casarini has put it, “The evolution of Sino-American relations will determine to a large extent the security dynamics in East Asia.” This clear-eyed assessment from

a think tank closely linked to European foreign policy decision-making must be borne in mind when looking at security questions in East Asia, where playing the laggard has meant that few in the region understand the EU's role or why they should engage with it. Yet East Asia is key to European economic growth, and stopping the proliferation of nuclear weapons is something that is in everyone's interests. But these facts from a European perspective are often missed when looking at East Asian security, where the discussion is usually focused on Beijing and Washington.

But nevertheless, it seems clear that the EU can carve out a niche for itself in providing support in dispute resolution. This can go beyond simply engaging on generally "environmental and energy security issues" but can instead try to insert the EU and its interests in a supportive way to help manage the numerous regional conflicts. Taiwan is an example of how this sort of carefully managed engagement can be carried out without aggravating the situation, and learning in detail from this experience is something

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that could bear fruit in other situations. Problematically, of course, if comprehensively applied, this approach would also require the EU to adopt a more robust and comprehensive strategy towards China. Something the EU has yet to officially formulate. Currently, the bilateral EU-China and EU-U.S.

relations are largely dictated by shifting political sands (with many of the other required relationships largely depending on the EU's position with regards the previously mentioned to) and moving them to a firmer footing would be essential in formulating a grand European strategy for East Asia.