

# Security Challenges in Asia: The Relevance of the European Experience

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### Sir John Major

Professor Yamanaka, many thanks for your kind introduction; and Mr Sasakawa, thank you very much for making it possible for this important dialogue to take place between our two countries. I am delighted to be here, and to take part in it.

And I would like to thank all of you for participating in this two-day conference, organized by Chatham House, the Nippon Foundation and the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation.

As one of the co-presidents of Chatham House, I know that the Nippon Foundation is one of our most important partners. I hope our partnership will continue to thrive long into the future, so that we can exchange informed ideas about the many pressing global problems before us. We will not be short of work, for there is no shortage of challenges.

The theme of this conference – the role of the nation state in tackling global challenges – is crucial in a world becoming increasingly global. Some people believe globalism will be the death knell for the nation state. They are wrong.

The nation state cannot – and should not – be ignored: it is not a derelict. National traditions, instincts and customs will never go away – and our world would be the poorer if they did. But we must recognize that protecting the nation state can sometimes lead to confrontation, where consensus would be more valuable. Cooperation is essential in confronting and solving the great challenges of today.

Let me begin with a fundamental truism: we live in a world that seems to become ever more perilous. We all wish this were not so – but it is. One only has to think of the mayhem in Syria, Iraq and much of the Middle East, the fighting in Crimea, the military and political conflicts in Asia, and the democratic deficit in parts of Africa to see where problems lie.

And this list is far from inclusive. A good dose of enduring optimism, and a firm belief in a more prosperous and secure world for all, are prerequisites for the world leaders of today as they confront the critical issues before them.

Even a casual look at our world shows how many global challenges must be addressed. In some cases, there are dangers we may be able to head off but, in others, they are tragically real and present: as we are seeing with so many innocent lives being lost due to the brutality of extremism.

The focus of this conference is Asia and Europe. Over the last forty years, the balance between the two has changed dramatically as Asia's economic development has exceeded all expectations. Such economic growth inevitably leads to political authority. Today, in an increasingly global world, both Asia and Europe have an interest in events far beyond their own borders.

What does all this change mean for Asia and, in particular, Japan? Japan, with the third largest economy in the world, is a truly global player and will remain so. Since the 1980s when Japan's leaders first articulated the concept of 'internationalization', your country has steadily acquired a greater global role.

Today, under the leadership of Prime Minister Abe, Japan is building on this tradition to promote a more 'proactive' role in international affairs. I welcome the fact that Japan is raising her profile in this way – not least in taking command of international 'anti-piracy' task forces, and committing troops to peace-keeping in Sudan.

The importance of Asia to the world is often seen through the lens of economic opportunities. This includes expanding trade and investment - not only in Europe and the US, but within Asia itself, specifically between the most resilient economies such as Japan, China, India, South Korea and, potentially, Indonesia.

But there is far more to Asia's future than that. Asia is a crucial political entity. While the world has its eyes on the Middle East and Ukraine, there are Asian security tensions that must not be ignored.

The first one I would highlight is China's military rise, and her growing defence expenditure. I have spoken often enough about welcoming China's emergence as an economic power. I do that most genuinely. Less welcome is that China is expanding her maritime presence in the East and South China Seas, and – in so doing – is creating tensions with – among others – Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam.

The newly-expanded Chinese Air Defence Identification Zone adds to Asian concerns. When the Zone was first promulgated, Japan observed that the airspace declaration could escalate regional and bilateral tensions, particularly those associated with the contested Senkaku or Diaoyu Islands. That is undoubtedly true, and the fact that confidence-building measures are limited in scope within North Asia raises the risk of those tensions mounting.

The reason for concern is clear: China is acting in a fashion that potentially challenges the international order which, if she miscalculates, may provoke a response. This may never happen but is a risk, nonetheless. To recognize that risk is the first step in reducing it.

The second Asia tension is North Korea's de facto nuclear weapons status, and the prospect of renewed conflict on the Korean peninsula. There is likely to be a fourth nuclear test within the next 12 months.

At the same time, despite signs of small improvement in the economy, Kim Jong-un remains politically vulnerable to domestic unrest and leadership rivals – especially if he fails to deliver on his promises to reboot the economy. China, as North Korea's ally, is increasingly irritated by Pyongyang but relatively limited in its direct influence. The result is that North Korea remains a dangerous wild card in the region, with an inexperienced and belligerent leader raising the risk of military conflict.

Other challenges – reflecting the global state of affairs in many corners of the world – are affecting security across Asia.

One is the growth of popular nationalism, which has become a vibrant political dynamic in many countries. Where this manifests itself as pride in one's country, it is entirely

benevolent: but if that sentiment becomes anti-foreigner, it is emphatically not. We await events to see how this develops.

The risk is clear: if public opinion is conditioned to be fearful of external threats, this – in turn – fuels more ‘nationalistic’ attitudes and, where this is the case, government leaders find it harder to de-escalate rising tensions. Fear has always been a potent driver of bad policy.

Another challenge is intra-alliance tensions. Perhaps one of the most talked-about today relates to the US commitment to Asia, and the strength of America’s ‘rebalancing’ towards the region. Others relate to tensions around post-colonial legacies: Hong Kong’s democratic ambitions spring to mind. Will China delay them, or concede them, or crush them? We wait to see – but China’s commitment to One Country – Two Systems was unambiguous.

The world will be watching to see if statesmanship resolves this dispute – or if the Chinese authorities remain intransigent.

But China’s commitment to yet more tensions relate to historic relationships in poor repair: Japan and Korea being one instance although, in this case, diplomatic exchanges are now taking place again. This is how wise governments conduct themselves, for such tensions – if left to fester – lead to political conflict that, once started, can be hard to control.

Unfortunately for Asia, she has some moribund institutions. Tri-lateralism between Japan, the Republic of Korea and China has not yet succeeded. The Six Party Talks on North Korea are dormant, while new initiatives such as President Park’s Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative remain underdeveloped. The ASEAN gatherings – although well established – often seem unfocused.

There are also concerns about energy security: as demand rises, supply remains uncertain. Following the Great Eastern Earthquake, Japan is now identifying new sources of energy, and debating whether her nuclear power plants should be reactivated. This is obviously a hugely sensitive issue within Japan, but long-term energy needs demand that it is examined.

Japan – like China and South Korea – is increasingly dependent on oil imports from the Middle East. In Japan’s case, the loss of nuclear energy has swollen her demand for oil. One side effect of the general search for energy security is the uncertainty as to whether energy will offer future opportunities for cooperation, or for further tension: it could be either.

Nor is oil the only commodity we should be concerned about. We think of the China-Tibet dispute as essentially political – but behind it lies the matter of ownership of the vast supplies of water on the Tibetan Plateau. Tibet has water – China is short of it: and much of what she has is polluted. This is not simply of bilateral concern: Tibet’s water also flows to India, Bangladesh, Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam and Cambodia.

Separatism is also a threat in Southeast Asia: consider here the military coup in Thailand, and continuing insurgency in the Philippines. In Myanmar there is a growth in ethnic and religious conflict.

National governments struggle to deal with such problems at the same time as they try to keep up with awakening economic and political expectations – and these are increased by the world-wide impact of the social network.

Now let me turn to my own backyard: Europe. And, given the current debate in the UK, let me make clear I see our future inside the EU, not outside it. Today is not the occasion to develop this theme, so let me simply say that if the UK were to leave, both she and the EU would be weakened. That is not the way forward.

Given the opportunities and challenges Asia presents, European nations – acting individually, and the European Union – acting collectively, need to be more involved in the region. A distant relationship is a missed opportunity, and I would like to explore three possible models of greater involvement.

First, I believe that there are ways in which Europe could be a useful model for Asian countries in their own efforts to increase security through enhanced co-operation. In Europe, Anglo-German and Franco-German reconciliation have, for example, been realised in part via public diplomacy, academic interaction and strong personal relationships. Here are traditional foes, who have often – over the centuries – been at war with one another, yet who now enjoy close and hugely co-operative relationships.

There are also lessons to be drawn from individual countries and crisis-defusing political settlements such as the Northern Ireland Peace Process. Here, again, two communities – hostile for centuries and with different and seemingly intransigent political and religious allegiances – have come together.

Drawing from my own political experience, I can attest that personal relations at senior levels of government can play a vital role in reducing – and sometimes, ending – tensions. This is often slow and painstaking work, but it can be very effective. Fear of the unknown increases tensions: familiarity reduces them. If leaders know and trust one another, then provocative actions or statements are less likely and difficult situations are more easily diffused.

Since 1945, Europe has – generally – succeeded in bridging divisions that, in the past, threatened to divide the Continent. The European Union, NATO, the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe have each played a part in building trust. There have been failures – such as the European Defence Community – but even they paved the way for initiatives such as the Common Foreign and Security Policy.

The second model sees Europe as a mediator in defusing tensions between Asian partners. At present, Asia looks at Europe's experience in confronting security challenges to see if there are lessons to be learned: perhaps one is that Europe could be more proactive in helping to resolve some of these challenges. Forgive me if this sounds presumptuous – I assure you that it is not intended to: it merely reflects an area of

European expertise. It is also a matter of European interest that Asian relations are harmonious.

Europe could do more of this. Third party mediation is an under-used asset in our modern world. The Asia-Europe Meeting has also been in place since 1996, and could play a more active role – both in resolving regional tensions and improving relations between our two regions.

Bilateral cultural diplomacy also has a role: I offer as examples educational exchanges, and British Council initiatives in North Korea. These can help to minimise regional tensions and, in so doing, open the door to progress on sensitive human rights issues. Lectures from afar won't make progress; dialogue might. In this regard, I wonder whether there might be a role for an 'Educational Marshall Plan' in northeast Asia. If so, surely the UK and UNESCO could help.

To summarize, I would like Europe to be seen as an active partner, working side by side with Asian countries and institutions to address the world's challenges together. At present, I believe there is a valid argument that Europe-Asia cooperation is focused only on the region itself. Surely this is too narrow? Why should focus not extend to developing global participation between European and Asian States so that (either bilaterally or multilaterally) they can address security challenges that do not respect neat geographical boundaries?

It is beginning: consider Japan's establishment of a permanent Self-Defence Forces base in Djibouti; the Republic of Korea's antipiracy initiatives; and also the strategic dialogues between the UK, Japan and the Republic of Korea. And we should not forget that expanded defence cooperation – and more explicit sharing of intelligence – could help minimise some of the new security challenges we all face. For example, I am delighted at the current growth in Anglo-Japanese contacts at both the political and military level.

I passionately believe that if we work and plan for a more efficient – and better – world order, we can build a more prosperous and secure future for all. But we dare not be complacent about security in Asia. The seeds of conflict are there. The risks are real and not phantoms. They may come in many guises, and be related not only to new security challenges, but to governance in the economic, social and energy spheres.

As we identify these threats we must seek to head them off. And by 'we', I mean everyone who can contribute. I repeat: in our global world, Asian problems impact far beyond Asia, and we all have a stake in the solution.

The world of today is very different to that of fifty years – or even twenty years – ago: the world of tomorrow will be different yet again.

It is in our hands to shape it, to make it better, if we have the determination and the wisdom to do so.

That is why conferences like this are so valuable, and I wish you every success in your discussion and debate during the next two days.