

7 November 2013

Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't: the EU's Asia Security Policies

When it comes to maintaining the security of the Asia-Pacific region, Axel Berkofsky believes the EU is caught between a rock and a hard place. China views Brussels' Asia policies with continued suspicion while the United States thinks the EU's 'soft power' approach is simply not enough.

By Axel Berkofsky for ISN

The European Union's (EU) Asia-Pacific policies continue to receive criticism from China and the United States. Beijing views Brussels' support for Washington's Asian pivot as tacit approval for the US-led containment of China. Further complicating China-EU relations are Beijing's complaints that Brussels 'interferes' too much in the country's internal affairs. The view from Washington is altogether different. Endorsing and supporting the pivot is one thing, but the EU needs to do more to satisfy the United States.

On the contrary, counter EU policymakers. Brussels has become quite adept at using its soft power credentials in order to promote peace and stability across the Asia-Pacific region. These might not get the same coverage as US-South Korean military maneuvers or the US-Japan missile defense system, but they have helped to expand trade and business ties between Europe and Asia. Consequently, the EU has now been doing its bit for regional peace and security for decades, EU policymakers typically explain.

Do more, Washington says

However, European 'soft power' is not good enough as far as Washington is concerned. "From an EU perspective it may be desirable to develop a more direct presence in the Asia Pacific to help ensure that the US remain committed to the alliance's security interests in other regions that are traditionally perceived as more vital to European security", [argue](#) Andrew S. Erickson and Austin Strange. Another widely-held perception is that Brussels is effectively a security 'free-rider' in Asia that benefits from the US military presence and the protection it offers to European trade and business. To support this argument, critics point to the naval protection that the US offers to the EU's [maritime trade with Asia](#), which accounts for approximately 25 per cent of all container shipping traffic.

Yet, while the EU cannot claim to have 100,000 armed forces personnel stationed permanently throughout the region, it's by no means militarily absent from Asia. The United Kingdom, for example, is a member of the Five-Power Defense Arrangements (FPDA), a military consultation forum that includes the US, Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand and Singapore. Several EU countries have set-up

defense dialogues with the likes of Japan and South Korea, with France, the UK and Germany even entering into 'strategic dialogues' with China. These latter partnerships are often accompanied by training programs for Chinese military officers, port calls, joint naval exercises and other military-military exchanges. Brussels also continues to work with various Asian countries to address cross-border issues such as maritime security, cyber-security and climate change.

The accusation of 'free-riding' on US security guarantees and the perceived lack of concrete and measurable 'hard' security policies have EU policymakers to 'sell' Brussels' participation in Asian security fora such as the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore as evidence of its commitment to Asian security. Catherine Ashton, the EU's High Representative of EU Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, used her speech at most recent Shangri-La Dialogue to support Brussels' counter-argument. She outlined how the EU was going to enhance its engagement with security actors across the Asia-Pacific region. Time will tell if actions speak louder than words.

Doing (Fairly) Well on the Ground

By contrast, the EU's 'softer' contributions to Asia's security landscape are, without doubt, far more impressive. Over the past 10 years, Brussels has contributed to the stabilization of East Timor, supervised the peace agreement between Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement and continues to support efforts to broker peace between the Muslim population in Mindanao and the government of the Philippines. After the recent lifting of sanctions, the EU is also poised to resume large-scale economic and development aid to Myanmar. Indeed, the EU remains the largest donor of humanitarian and development aid to Asia. Between 2007 and 2013, the [European Commission allocated](#) an estimated €5.2 billion in development aid to the region.

Brussels' 'soft power' credentials continue to be tarnished, however, by a fairly robust trade in weapons and associated technologies to Asia. European defense contractors are particularly active in South and Southeast Asia, and are especially interested in tying up contracts jet fighters, submarines and other naval vessels. Despite an arms embargo that has been in place since 1989, China nevertheless remains an important market for the European defense industry. Arms transfers from European companies account for approximately 7% of China's defense procurement budget. Moreover, Asia combined imports roughly 20% of its armaments from Europe, compared with 30% from the US.

Even More Engaged (on Paper)

Even before this year's Shangri La Dialogue, the EU was signaling to the World that it was planning to do more in Asia. In June 2012, Brussels released its '[Guidelines on the EU's Foreign and Security Policy in East Asia](#)'. The guidelines revealed how the EU plans to intensify its exchanges with the "region's key players", with a particular focus on the potential for 'High-Level Strategic Dialogue' and the 'High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue' with the likes of China and Japan. Calls were also made for the intensification of dialogue with South Korea over the North's nuclear program and for increased military-to-military exchanges between Asian and EU Member States.

It is hardly unsurprising that a significant part of the guidelines deal with China and EU-China cooperation. Brussels remains concerned about Beijing's poor track record on human rights and its perceived disregard for the rule of law. The guidelines also point out more than once that China's integration into regional and global mechanisms governance remains a work in progress. Finally, the guidelines urge China to become more transparent about and accountable for the quality and quantity of its defense expenditures. Of course, the EU's request more transparency China's defense spending will fall on deaf ears in Beijing. Brussels' confirmation that it has "a strong interest in partnership and co-operation with the US on foreign and security policy challenges related to East

Asia” is an altogether different story.

An EU Pivot to Asia?

Indeed, the EU’s ongoing engagement with a host of Asian states has prompted debate over whether Brussels’ regional policies constitute a European ‘pivot’. The European Institute for Security Studies’ (EUISS) [Nicola Casarini](#) thinks that they might. “There is a widespread belief that the EU lacks the necessary capabilities – as well as the political unity – to engage effectively in this distant but increasingly important part of the world. However, closer examination shows that the EU and its member states already began their own rebalancing towards Asia roughly a decade ago”.

Yet, in light of the United States’ pivot to Asia, the EU is likely to be confronted with the time- and energy-consuming task of explaining to Chinese counterparts how and why its version is not an attempt to further contain the regional influence of China. Further complicating matters are announcements of additional ‘pivots’ by individual member-states. During a recent visit to Indonesia, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius announced a French ‘pivot’ to Asia with a particular focus on diplomacy and trade.

Smelling Containment...

The prospects for Brussels selling their ‘pivot’ as altogether different to the American version do not look good. “The EU can do all the explaining it wants. Brussels’ jump onto the however-shaped ‘pivot to Asia’ train stands for Brussels endorsing and indeed supporting US-driven China containment policies”, a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs official told ISN Security Watch. Catherine Ashton’s 2012 [joint statement](#) with the then-US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also confirmed Beijing’s suspicions that Brussels is ready to gang up with Washington to contain China’s growing geopolitical and economic prowess. While Brussels insists that the declaration does not stand for any of this, Beijing continues to wonder why Catherine Ashton didn’t say so. “If the joint declaration does not stand for the beginning of joint US-China containment policies, why didn’t Lady Ashton make that at all clear?”, asked the same Ministry of Foreign Affairs official.

Conspiracy theories aside, the Ashton-Clinton statement is still what Beijing probably hoped for: a paper tiger. While the statement speaks about the prospects of EU-US cooperation in transnational crime, cyber-security and development, the only tangible follow-up has been the establishment of regular meetings between US State Department officials and their British, German, French and Italian counterparts. This is hardly a coordinated EU-US policy strategy and more a case of informal discussion groups on matters of mutual interest.

...While Working with Brussels (a little bit)

While Beijing does not fully trust the EU, it nevertheless continues to hold formal and regular discussions with Brussels on Asian security. In 2010, the EU and China set-up a regular dialogue on defense and security, including training exchanges and sharing ideas on crisis management and tackling piracy. The [‘EU-China ‘High-level Strategic Dialogue’](#) will hold its fourth round of discussions this November. Brussels hopes that the Dialogue will encourage Beijing to become more transparent about its military build-up and will actively consult with the EU before adopting security policies for the region and beyond. That’s unlikely to happen. Despite the formation of a ‘strategic partnership’ between Brussels and Beijing ten years ago, there are few European policymakers willing to bet on China opening up its thinking behind its regional security policies to the West.

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[A Thirsty Dragon: Rising Chinese Crude Oil Demand and Prospects for Multilateral Energy Security Cooperation](#)

[Re-Thinking Europe's Security Priorities](#)

[International Cooperation on Cyber-Security](#)

[European Security and Defense Policy](#)

For more information on issues and events that shape our world please visit the ISN's [Dossiers](#) and the [ISN Blog](#).

Axel Berkofsky is Professor at the University of Pavia, Italy and Senior Associate Research Fellow at the Milan-based Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI).

Publisher

[International Relations and Security Network \(ISN\)](#)

Creative Commons - Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported

<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?lng=en&id=172135>

ISN, Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, Switzerland