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Europe's Pacific Neglect

While Europe is preoccupied with the deepening euro crisis, the US is placing more of its strategic focus on Asia. This year's Munich Security Conference was a warning to European leaders not to overlook the region.

By Carolin Hilpert for ISN

As the global political 'center of gravity' moves from the Atlantic to the Pacific and Indian Oceans, the participants at the 48th Munich Security Conference wisely discussed the rise of China, the United States' strategic turn to Asia, and Europe's role within this context. Despite major shifts in the global order taking place, the old continent is increasingly preoccupied with its own problems; if it does not take note soon, Europe risks being relegated to the fringes of power.

After a decade of costly wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, US President Barack Obama unveiled a new military strategy in early January: In order to address the US's future needs and priorities, a much greater strategic focus will be placed on Asia. In order to achieve this, two of the four US combat brigades stationed in Europe will be withdrawn, giving rise to worries that still more may leave due to fiscal constraints.

In a rare joint appearance overseas, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta sought to reassure those in attendance of US commitment to security cooperation with Europe. "Our military footprint in Europe will remain larger than in any other part of the world," said Panetta, while Clinton added that Europe remained America's partner of first resort.

As Conrad Tribble, US Consul General in Munich, explained to the ISN: "Our relationship with the core of Europe - with the European Union and NATO, our key allies for the last 55 years - has changed, because we now are working with those countries no longer primarily on the challenges within Europe - as we did for example during the Cold War - but on the global challenges that confront both of us."

Europe - introverted and incoherent

Despite these rhetoric reassurances, German Minister of Defense Thomas de Maizière pointed out that Europe will nevertheless have to assume more responsibility for regional security. The extent to which the continent is able to do so is open to debate however: Europe is currently preoccupied with the seemingly interminable crisis engulfing the Eurozone. At the time of writing there had already been more than ten summits aimed at saving the common currency - all to no avail.

Participants at the Munich conference agreed that the Eurozone - and with it, perhaps even the EU -

still run the risk of disintegrating. Former German Finance Minister Peer Steinbrück noted the rise of old national resentments while Kevin Rudd, Australia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, warned: "The danger that I see in Europe, is Europe progressively becoming so introspective and so preoccupied with its internal problems on the economy and on the Eurozone in particular that Europe runs the risk of talking itself into an early economic and therefore global political grave."

Apart from the current economic crisis, there is a second reason to be doubtful when considering Europe's future strategic and military potential: Previous operations have shown large deficits in Europe's existing security architecture. The 2011 operation in Libya, many argue, would have been impossible without the US, even if it was '[leading from behind](#)'. Under the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), the EU was not able to do any more than open an operational headquarters in Rome. The idea of a permanent headquarters for EU military operations is almost as old as the ESDP itself, yet [UK opposition](#) to the project has hampered any substantial progress. Add to this a largely fragmented defense industry where various European companies compete against one another - French Dassault and British BAE Systems against the European Aeronautic Defence and Space Company (EADS) in the [development of military drones](#) for example - and the future does not look particularly promising.

Exiting the geopolitical stage?

Against the backdrop of these observations, it must also be noted that Europe is currently not very active in Asia - except for in economic affairs. But it is hard to overlook the strategic and geopolitical importance of Asia and China in particular: By 2025, China's military expenditures are [projected](#) to equal, if not exceed, the US defense budget. Within a decade, the Chinese economy may be equal in size to that of the US; China has already overtaken Japan as the world's second largest economy. By 2015, Asian economies will be as large as the US and Europe combined, according to the IMF. European states simply cannot afford to stand aside and watch.

The rise of Asia - and China in particular - should not however be seen as a zero-sum game, China's Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Zhang Zhijun told the audience. In fact, he sees great potential and called for further cooperation between Europe and Asia. Ng Eng Hn, Singapore's Minister of Defense, added that since many Asian countries are rather young, their institutions, including military ones, are still developing; international partnerships could play an important role in the maturation process. At the same time, Clinton invited Europe to join with US efforts: "America and Europe need a robust dialogue about the opportunities that lie ahead in the Pacific-Asia region."

Consul General Tribble told ISN: "I personally see great potential for both the United States and Europe in terms of working together in Asia. There is also a lot of potential for strategic cooperation, in institution-building in younger democracies, or cooperation on regional concerns whether they are security, demographic, social or cultural. Those are areas in which Europe and the US would be natural partners." Europe has a rich and vast experience in various areas, like the virtual elimination of national borders, the installation of a free trade regime, and in solving violent conflicts. Why not use this knowledge in advising Asia?

Nonetheless there is a certain "unreality" in European debates concerning Asian issues, Rudd observed. While Australia sees the rise of China from an economic and strategic angle, Europe sees it at best in economic terms and is therefore missing out on the broader global debate. As the growth forecasts for China and Asia show, in terms of sheer size and thus global political weight, Europe cannot afford to be divided on such secondary issues as to whether to introduce a financial transaction tax or establish a permanent military operation headquarters: The challenges that await have much larger geopolitical dimensions.

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