

If the World is a Stage, is Europe a Background Actor?

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Speaking recently at Chatham House, Herman van Rompuy – president of the European Council – used a theater metaphor to refer to Europe's role on the world stage. He said: "faced with the new play of global interdependence and global governance, we [the EU] need a presence in all the world's regions." While acknowledging the importance of Asia for European interests, his message about Europe's influence in that part of the world was straightforward: "Europe is clearly not a Pacific power and will not become one." Catherine Ashton, the EU's chief diplomat, delivered a more confident message during her visit to Asia earlier this year, stating that developing comprehensive relations with Asia is one of the EU's major strategic objectives and that the EU wants to be an "active and constructive" player in Asian regionalism. To bring van Rompuy's metaphor to modern times, in a movie about the politics of the Asia-Pacific region, would Europe play a leading role or only be a background actor?

The EU enters the stage

The foundations of an EU strategy for the region were laid in 2007 when the Council published the East Asia policy guidelines. A revision of the document has been on the EU agenda for some time but a final agreement on the outcome has yet to be reached, which leaves the club of 27 with policy prescriptions that are often outdated. The EU's ties to the region are significant: the EU is China's biggest and ASEAN's third biggest trading partner. It is also the largest investor in ASEAN countries with an average of 20.6 percent of foreign direct investment over the past three years. The scope of the EU's cooperation with the region is broad and encompasses not only a number of Free Trade Agreements - either already in force (the ROK) or under negotiation (ASEAN, India, Malaysia, Singapore, and Japan) – but also bilateral summits, participation in regional fora, and parliamentary dialogues with Asian officials.

Ashton's visit to the region in April 2012 and the adoption of the EU-ASEAN action plan for deepening cooperation on political and security issues, human rights, maritime cooperation, terrorism, and disaster relief was publicized as bringing this relationship to a new level. At the EU-ASEAN ministerial meeting, Ashton expressed her hope for an early signing of the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) which would then pave the way for the EU's participation in the East Asia Summits. During the same visit,

the European delegation confirmed the EU's willingness to strengthen political dialogue with Indonesia and Vietnam. A newly opened office of the European Union in Myanmar further symbolizes the EU's long-term commitment to the region.

But the expectations toward the European Union are much higher than what has already been undertaken. Prior to the EU's recent activism in the region, the United States has launched diplomatic *démarches* in Brussels and European national capitals in an attempt to involve European colleagues more in Asia. But there is a genuine fear that Ashton's recent excursion was a one-off gesture rather than a sign of a genuine change in EU foreign policy. Diplomats in Washington, DC are already fretting about July, when Ashton and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton are due to make a joint statement at the ASEAN Regional Forum.

Overcoming stage fright

The EU, on the other hand, seems to have doubts whether teaming up with the US is the path it should follow and if so until what point. More importantly, the EU is lacking the vision and inspiration for the role it wants to play on the Asia-Pacific stage. How can the EU overcome its current inertia?

A survey conducted recently by the EU Institute for Security Studies of some 100 European and US experts suggests that there are two main ways to proceed.

Shock therapy: protecting economic and trade interests is a clear priority for both the EU and the US, but only 35 percent of respondents saw the EU and US interests in this issue as convergent. At the same time, promotion of regional integration clearly stands out in the survey as an issue on which European and US interests are viewed by 18 percent of experts as somewhat or very divergent. Emphasizing the prospect of transatlantic disagreements in the region and the damage they could cause to transatlantic partnership might serve as a form of shock therapy and galvanize the EU.

Reassurance: providing the EU with a new mission with which it feels comfortable might be another solution. According to the survey results, there seems to be a clear potential division of labor on a variety of issues. US respondents were of the opinion that the EU's involvement in the Asia Pacific could offer most added value in the area of protecting economic and trade interests (93 percent), promotion of human rights (94 percent), and engaging regional actors on issues of global governance (83 percent). US potential for exerting influence in the field of human rights and transparency in currency practices was regarded as somewhat limited.

The EU's capacity to engage regional actors on issues of global governance is important and could serve as an excellent point of departure. Given the region's many geo-political

hotspots and occasional flare-ups combined with its importance in global trade, every friction or confrontation could have severe consequences if not contained. To enhance stability and keep frictions to a minimum, the region needs a solid regional structure founded on rules by which all actors abide.

Winning act

Engaging regional actors on issues of global governance and promoting respect for international law – ambitious and reassuring – would be appreciated both in the region and in the United States. At last week’s Shangri-La Dialogue, US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta reconfirmed the US’ “solid commitment to establish a set of rules that all play by is one that we believe will help support peace and prosperity in this region.” However, given memories of the selective approach of the US to international law in the Bush era, US attempts to get involved in such a manner will only aggravate the mistrust that increasingly characterizes the US-China relationship.

Conversely, the EU has fostered the image of a normative power and a similar role in the Asia Pacific not only perfectly matches its soft-power profile but is also compatible with US strategies in the region. The EU may not have the resources to act as a global policeman but it is in the EU’s own interests to communicate its vision of the region where all actors play by the same rules and are committed to a peaceful resolution of disputes. A crisis in the South China Sea would have catastrophic consequences for EU commerce in the region. At the same time, commodity prices would skyrocket, putting already fragile European economies at additional risk. Engaging with the region at an early stage would also ensure the EU’s seat at the negotiation table – should a conflict scenario ever materialize.

Europe has to realize that although it may not be among the Oscar winners this time, it is in the EU’s hands to at least receive a nomination and some attention on the red carpet.

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