

## **Europe and Asia as global security actors**

**By Shada Islam**

Asia-Europe relations used to be about business, not politics. The emergence of the Southeast Asian “tiger” economies in the 1980s and Europe’s quest for a share of the region’s booming market helped spur the drive for closer Asia-Europe relations and the launch in Bangkok in 1996 of ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting), an informal platform for discussion between the two sides.

Business between the two regions is still booming. EU trade with Asia amounted to over 750 billion euros in 2009 and total European investments in the region are estimated at 350 billion euros. These strong ties provide the basis for a solid ASEM partnership.

However, in a globalised and interdependent world, Asia and Europe are under pressure to take on a more forceful political and diplomatic role both in their neighbourhood and in the wider world. They also need to engage more strongly with each other to deal with shared security challenges.

Both regions are taking important security-related initiatives which illustrate a similar commitment to tackling both traditional, military threats as well as non-traditional security challenges including terrorism, poverty and disease, access to and security of sea lanes and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Neither Asia nor Europe can - or have any ambition to - take over America’s primordial global security role. In Europe, NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) remains the pivotal defence alliance despite Europe’s determination to boost its clout on the world stage through a common defence and security policy.

Europe has deployed over 20 civilian and military missions in 3 continents so far as part of its emerging security and defense policy. The entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in January this year, the nomination of Catherine Ashton as the European Union’s first-ever “foreign minister” and agreement on the establishment of a Europe-wide diplomatic corps known as the “external action service” have raised further hopes that the 27-nation bloc will finally starting punching its weight on the global stage.

Meanwhile, Pax Americana continues to reign supreme in Asia, a region fraught with historical grievances and ongoing tensions. However, Japan, China, India and members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are seeking to tackle regional and global security challenges through an array of pan-regional

organisations and alliances, including the Asean Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit and the informal "Shangri-La Dialogue" that meets every year in Singapore to discuss security questions.

Japan and Australia have further intensified the debate on regional architecture by making new proposals for different forms of a wider Asian community. Former Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama proposed the creation of an East Asia Community last year while former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has called for the setting up of an Asia Pacific Community. Japan's new prime minister, Naoto Kan, has said he will continue to push ahead along the same lines.

The plethora of regional cooperation initiatives are an encouraging sign that Asians are overcoming longstanding rivalries. At a recent "Shangri La Dialogue" meeting in Singapore, organised by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies and attended by the US and several European states, there was agreement that Asia-Pacific states must forge a coherent and collaborative response to the region's complex security risks.

Food and energy security, ethnic conflicts, insurgencies and rising tensions on the Korean Peninsula were key issues discussed, with North Korea's unprovoked torpedoing of the Cheonan, a South Korean corvette, in late-March described as one of the most significant threats to regional stability.

These quasi-parallel attempts in Asia and Europe to forge stronger regional security ties are proof that both regions recognise the compelling need to deal with both local and global challenges. The next step has to be closer Asia-Europe contacts, exchanges and information sharing.

There is already some interaction between the two regions. The European Union, together with five contributing countries from ASEAN, as well as with Norway and Switzerland, deployed a peace implementation and monitoring mission in Aceh (Indonesia) from 2005-2006. The mission was designed to monitor the implementation of various aspects of the peace agreement signed by the Indonesian Government and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM).

Europeans also traditionally send a representative to the annual ARF ministerial meeting and are hoping to become members of the East Asia Summit. Europe's "strategic partnerships" with Japan, China and India provide a forum for regular exchanges on security issues. However, while politically prestigious, these strategic partnership agreements have not yet resulted in a real meeting of minds on dealing with security challenges.

What is missing is a vibrant, regular and frank Asia-Europe dialogue which would allow both sides to forge a common stance on key security threats.

Europe's experience in regional cooperation could be very useful to Asia, including on security issues. ASEM provides a platform for just such knowledge-share and exchanges. Although there is no dearth of ASEM contacts and meetings - Asian and European leaders, foreign ministers and diplomats meet regularly to discuss shared foreign and security policy concerns - the forum has not been used as effectively as anticipated.

At the Beijing summit in October 2008, for instance, leaders issued a statement which included references to countering terrorism, tackling the nuclear threat posed by North Korea and Iran and the need to stabilise Afghanistan. They also made a joint call for national reconciliation in Myanmar.

Statements, however, are no substitute for action - and making set speeches is not the same thing as really listening to and understanding each other. For all their pledges to ensure world peace and stability, ASEM partners have failed to come up with a credible joint strategy on dealing with global flashpoints, whether in Asia, Africa or the Middle East.

Asia and Europe have long disagreed on how to deal with the military junta in Myanmar. While increasingly impatient with the country's military rulers, ASEAN governments reject any imposition of sanctions against the regime. China, meanwhile, is reluctant to agree tougher sanctions against Iran over the country's nuclear programme. And although it is the only country which has any clout in Pyongyang, China has also refused to publicly denounce North Korea over the torpedoing of the South Korean vessel.

While such discord is not surprising given each region's different interests and priorities, ASEM partners can work together more effectively on other security challenges, including through joint peace-keeping missions, action to counter terrorism through information sharing, intelligence gathering and improved cooperation among law enforcement agencies.

ASEM can also boost cooperation in addressing emerging threats to human security such as the spread of infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS, and be ready to take joint action in the face of natural disasters. Maritime security and cooperation to stop nuclear proliferation are other areas where joint ASEM efforts are worth exploring.

Such initiatives will not only contribute to increased global security and consolidate Asia-Europe relations, but also help maintain ASEM's relevance in a rapidly changing world.

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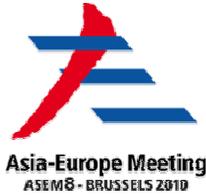
**Shada Islam** is a journalist in Brussels with a long experience of EU-Asia relations. This is a part of a series of articles being published by "Particip" an independent, internationally-recognised consultancy, which is under contract to the European Commission, to look at different aspects of the multi-faceted Asia-

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