

Press release

A presence farther east: Can Europe play a strategic role in the Asia-Pacific region?

by Rem Korteweg

A new report by Rem Korteweg of the Centre for European Reform calls for Europe to engage more actively on Asian security issues.

Europe has important trade relations with countries in East Asia, but increasing regional tensions, especially maritime and territorial disputes between China and its neighbours, put essential European economic and security interests at risk.

In spite of serious challenges in Europe's immediate neighbourhood, the EU and its member-states cannot be strategically ambivalent about Asia. China's rise and the eastward shift of economic and political power is structural; a strategic approach to the region is needed. Business as usual in Asia, where Europe prioritises commercial diplomacy and relies on bland statements of concern in response to security events, no longer suffices.

Europe's economic interests dictate a stronger approach; the importance of the transatlantic relationship warrants it; and its Asian partners demand it. Asia's evolving power politics will lead countries to gradually lose patience with Europe's tactical, and commercially-inspired, neutrality, possibly impacting the trade ties Europe so hopes to preserve. Europe will also be increasingly at risk of being picked apart by its Asian partners.

If EU countries want to be security producers instead of security consumers, play a global role commensurate to their global economic presence and promote an international rules-based order, they need to step up their game and put a security strategy for East Asia into practice.

The EU and its member-states should:

- ★ Co-ordinate their own Asia policies better and think more constructively about Asian geopolitics and the strategic implications of China's rise;
- ★ Engage more with Washington to identify where the US and European 'pivots to Asia' intersect;
- ★ Strengthen ASEAN's role as a multilateral security organisation;
- ★ Discuss regional security issues with Asian partners, including China;
- ★ Build up defence relations through military-to-military exchanges, co-operating on maritime security and rotating a European naval presence in Asia;
- ★ Align EU trade policy with Europe's geopolitical interests by successfully pursuing free-trade agreements with Asian partners as well as the United States;
- ★ Promote civil society contacts and historical reconciliation between rival countries in the region.

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Notes for editors:

1. For media enquiries please contact the CER on either +44 20 7233 1199 or at info@cer.org.uk.
2. This report is available from the CER website (www.cer.org.uk).