European policy in Asia: Getting past mercatorism and mercantilism

by Ian Bond

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Asia is a dangerous place, and closer to Europe than most Europeans think. They cannot leave Trump's America to tackle all Asia's security problems.

Europe is not half as worried as it should be about the security situation in Asia, or half as engaged in dealing with it. In recent days North Korea carried out its sixth and most powerful test of a nuclear weapon, and launched a number of missiles of varying ranges. It is unlikely that any negotiations, sanctions or sabotage can now stop North Korea becoming the ninth country in the world to have useable nuclear weapons; and military action to prevent it would have catastrophic consequences in the region and beyond.

But North Korea is only one of the current security crises in the Asia-Pacific region. China's increasing military power and assertiveness, especially in the South China Sea, has led to tension with a number of neighbouring countries as well as with the US. In August, Indian and Chinese forces "jostled" each other in disputed territory in the Himalayas (fortunately no-one started shooting). In the Philippines, Islamist extremists linked to the so-called Islamic State have called on foreign jihadis to join them in fighting government forces on the southern island of Mindanao.

Europe's reaction to most of these crises is limited. The EU and the UK have been quick to condemn North Korea's nuclear test, and will no doubt support additional UN sanctions on Pyongyang. But the British foreign secretary, Boris Johnson, has acknowledged that "none of the military options are good". The EU's high representative for foreign and security policy, Federica Mogherini, has said that denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula can only be achieved through peaceful means; she has not said what could be done to improve on previous failed attempts to persuade the North Korean regime to give up its nuclear weapons programmes.

European powers struggle even more to agree a firm line on issues involving China. The Philippines took China to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in 2013 to challenge China's claim to most of the South China Sea; when Manila won its case in 2016, EU member-states could only agree to

'acknowledge' the ruling. When in June 2017 the United Nations Human Rights Council debated China's human rights performance, Greece blocked an EU statement critical of China: China is a major investor in Greece. The EU has been silent about the China-India stand-off: it has not even appealed for calm as the two nuclear powers flexed their muscles.

Europeans make two main mistakes about Asia. The first results, perhaps, from the fact that most Europeans first see the map of the world as a rectangle, not a sphere, thanks to the ingenious 16th century Flemish cartographer Gerardus Mercator. The Mercator projection makes Europe seem nearer to America and farther from Asia than in reality it is. Brussels is closer to Beijing than it is to Los Angeles; Pyongyang is closer to the eastern border of the EU than to the West coast of the US. Based on their distorted perception of distances, most Europeans (including policy-makers) tend to take an 'out of sight, out of mind' approach to all but the most serious problems in Asia.

The second mistake is to see Asia mostly as a continent of economic opportunities, rather than of political and security risks. The departmental plan for 2015-2020 of the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office exemplifies this: the only specific Asia-related priorities concern trade and investment relations with China, India and ASEAN countries.

This mercantile perspective is understandable: five of the world's ten largest non-EU economies are in the Asia-Pacific region. The EU's top ten trading partners in Asia account for more than 30 per cent of its global trade in goods, more than any other region. Projected economic growth of 5.5 per cent this year in the Asia-Pacific region will far outstrip growth in the US (2.1 per cent) and eurozone (1.9 per cent). Governments fear that their economic interests will suffer if they speak out on disputes in which China has a stake. So member-states often prefer the EU to say nothing that the Chinese government might disagree with; and if the Union has to say something critical of Beijing, individual member-states will sometimes undermine the EU line in private, to the frustration of EU officials (but the benefit of the national economy).

The result of these two mistakes is that Europeans persistently pay too little attention to security issues in Asia. North Korea's sabre-rattling should remind European leaders that this neglect is dangerous. Europe (including the UK) should think about how to use what instruments they have to reduce tensions and manage conflicts.

British prime minister Theresa May's visit to Japan from August 30th to September 1st was fortuitously well-timed to show her that 'Global Britain' will have to do more than despatching the occasional trade delegation to the Far East if it is to become a serious regional player after Brexit. The two countries trumpeted the UK's "strengthened security engagement in the Asia-Pacific region", including the "potential deployment of a UK aircraft carrier", and announced more joint exercises, increased defence equipment co-operation and more discussions of international security. But occasional visits to the region by the Royal Navy or the Foreign Secretary will not give Britain much lasting influence: it will need to show more sustained involvement.

The EU also needs to step up its political and security engagement with the region. The EU Global Strategy (EUGS) adopted in 2016 recognises that "there is a direct connection between European prosperity and Asian security", and speaks of scaling up Europe's security role in Asia. But the high representative's first annual report on implementing the EUGS is almost entirely silent on Asian issues.

The separate report to the European Parliament on CFSP priorities for 2017 devotes four paragraphs out of 77 to East, South and South-East Asia, but says nothing of substance on what the EU should do about the most important regional security challenges.

Europe can no longer simply leave Asian security problems for the US to sort out, as it has for the last 70 years. The administration of President Donald Trump is struggling to respond coherently to the various crises. Trump appeared to be threatening war with North Korea after the August 29th missile launch, only for his defence secretary, James Mattis, to tell journalists: "We're never out of diplomatic solutions". Neither the State Department nor the Pentagon has a senior civilian official in charge of Asia policy, and many US ambassadorial posts in the region are vacant (including that in Seoul). Trump's protectionism is adding to the problems and alienating his regional partners: even as North Korea threatened the South militarily, Trump threatened to cancel the US's free trade deal with Seoul. If Japan and South Korea come to see the US as potentially unreliable in a crisis, they may decide that they need their own nuclear weapons capability as a deterrent to North Korea, further ratcheting up tension.

Even after Brexit, it will still make sense for the main European powers to continue to speak with one voice in discussions of Asian security issues. At the Shangri-La dialogue in Singapore in 2016, then French defence minister (now foreign minister) Jean-Yves Le Drian proposed that "European navies … co-ordinate to ensure a presence that is as regular and visible as possible in the maritime areas in Asia". That would be a good move: perhaps the EU could scale down its counter-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden (where the security situation has improved in recent years), and instead rotate ships through the South China Sea and beyond. That would dispel the impression that the waters around China are Beijing's private preserve, and enable European navies to protect shipping lanes while helping regional partners to develop their own capabilities.

Given the relative size of forces, Europe cannot hope to replace the US's military role in Asia. But faced with security crises that could lead to destabilising conflicts and disruption to global trade, it makes sense for European powers to try to mitigate, however inadequately, the damage caused by erratic US policy-making. France has a permanent military presence in the Pacific region because of its South Pacific territories, and its navy regularly sails through the South China Sea; but it would clearly like other European countries to share the burden (and the risk of Chinese displeasure). The UK can deploy ships in the Far East from time to time, but does not have enough vessels to sustain a lasting military presence in the region. Acting together, however, the leading European powers could achieve more than they can individually.

Europe also has non-military assets that it can draw on. Germany's trade relations with the region give it significant political influence in Beijing, even if it is reluctant to think about military aspects of security; the UK and France can work with China as fellow permanent members of the UN Security Council. While South Korea, Japan and the US have no diplomatic relations with North Korea, seven EU countries have resident embassies. They can serve as sources of information and channels of communication; their access in Pyongyang may be limited, but they can try to explain to their hosts why the West responds to North Korea in the way it does, and (without condoning North Korea's nuclear weapons programmes) seek to understand what value Kim Jong-Un sees in possessing such weapons, and under what circumstances he might think of using them. That could reduce the risk of either side misunderstanding the other's intentions.

Elsewhere in Asia, the EU has long supported ASEAN's development; as Rem Korteweg proposed in a 2015 CER article, it should do more to increase the organisation's effectiveness, including helping to strengthen the ability of ASEAN members around the South China Sea to deal with illegal fishing, piracy and maritime security problems. The EU has no interest in provoking direct confrontation with China (and ASEAN countries would not want it), but it does have an interest in good order in the South China Sea – through which one-third of all global trade passes. In the Philippines, the EU has for several years been involved in supporting the peace process in Mindanao (as has the UK, in its own right); both should be prepared to help the Philippine government improve its capacity to fight extremism while respecting human rights, to ensure that jihadist groups do not become entrenched in Mindanao.

Finally, EU member-states need to steel themselves to have a difficult conversation with China on all these regional issues. On trade, the EU and China may sometimes find themselves on the same side in opposing Trump's protectionism. But Beijing needs to know that support for the international trading system does not equate to the EU accepting China's stance on security issues also: the US is not the only external power worried by what is happening in North Korea, and Europe also expects China to take more responsibility for managing the situation. The Chinese authorities need to hear that it is legitimate for China to hold naval exercises with Russia in the Baltic Sea (as it did in July), but it is equally legitimate for European navies to be in the South and East China Seas and to exercise with regional partners there. And they need to hear that while Europe welcomes China's Belt and Road Initiative as a way of bringing China closer to Europe, the initiative also brings Europe closer to Asia and Asian security problems. That in turn demands that Europe's engagement with Asia, like its world map, become three-dimensional.

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