



Europe cannot make up its mind about the US pivot

by Rem Korteweg

Two years ago the United States announced a renewed focus on the Asia-Pacific. Its strategic rebalance – also known as the ‘pivot’ – is driven, among other things, by worries about security. But the EU and its member-states are confused about what this American shift means for their security policies. At stake is the direction of European policy towards Asia, and crucially, how Europe sees the future of the transatlantic relationship in the Asian century.

Despite some early attempts to co-operate, Europe has failed to develop a coherent policy in response to Washington’s initiative. The US put the ‘pivot’ on the agenda of the last EU-US summit in November 2011, and the transatlantic partners agreed to increase their “dialogue on Asia-Pacific issues and co-ordinate activities”. In July 2012, at the ASEAN Regional Forum (a meeting of Asian leaders including the US and EU), a declaration of intent was signed between High Representative Catherine Ashton and then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. The declaration mentioned that the US and EU could work together on regional issues such as maritime security, non-proliferation, cyber security and counter-piracy. However, there has been little follow-up. Informally, a group of French, British, German and Italian officials and US State Department counterparts regularly compare notes on Washington’s security policy in Asia, but this is more an American one-way street, than a strategic dialogue.

The lack of momentum partly stems from this year’s changes to President Obama’s foreign policy

team and subsequent European uncertainty about what the Americans expect from Europe on Asia. But the main reason is that Europe has not made up its mind about the pivot. There are four distinct – but not mutually exclusive – sets of ideas that divide policy-makers in the EU and its member-states.

A first set of ideas holds that Europe should pivot together with the United States. The EU’s guidelines for foreign and security policy in Asia – updated in 2012 – embrace this: “The EU has a strong interest in partnership and co-operation with the US on foreign and security policy challenges related to East Asia.” Kurt Campbell, the former US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian affairs, favoured this approach, and the declaration by Ashton and Clinton notes that Europe and the US can reinforce each other’s positions. ‘Pivoting together’ would give positive momentum to a transatlantic security relationship increasingly characterised by growing US criticism of declining European burden-sharing in security affairs. This could lead to common

contributions to maritime security and missile defence, or to intensifying security dialogues with Asian partners, such as Japan and Korea, perhaps through NATO. The UK, for instance, has deployed a Royal Navy frigate to the region to contribute to maritime security, and NATO's secretary-general visited Japan and South Korea in April 2013. However, many European governments say they may be reluctant to give anything more than diplomatic support to Washington in Asia.

A second group agrees that Europe should focus on Asian security issues – notably because trade disruption due to Asian territorial disputes could upset a fragile European economy – but that it should do so independently of the US. It argues that Europe's position in Asia differs from that of the US, and that it should avoid entanglement in the emerging great power competition between America and China. Besides, the US and EU compete for Asian trade and investment. Europe is also viewed differently in the region; Japanese and Philippine officials believe America's security presence is necessary to balance China's rise, while they see Europe primarily as a trading partner. During his visit to Jakarta in August 2013, France's minister of foreign affairs, Laurent Fabius, announced a French 'pivot' to Asia that would focus on diplomacy and trade. Asia hands at some European ministries of foreign affairs and in the EEAS (the EU's foreign policy arm) like to say that what gives Europe a unique voice in Asia is precisely that it is not the United States. They suggest that Europe should try to strengthen regional institutions, such as ASEAN, and deepen economic relations. Complementarity with a US agenda would be a bonus. Aside from France, Germany's trade-driven approach to Asia also fits this mould. NATO would only have a very limited role at best.

Even if European governments share American concerns, it does not necessarily mean that Europe should play an active role in Asian security. According to a third school, Europe is a regional actor, not a global power. In light of European economic and military constraints, as well as European security priorities, it should instead focus on its neighbourhood, particularly in the south. A new transatlantic bargain would emerge: by focusing on the European periphery, Europeans would allow the US to shift its attention elsewhere. NATO and EU officials often make this argument, and it is supported by the UK's defence minister, Philip Hammond, who said in Singapore in June that Europe needs to focus on its "own backyard as our contribution to a greater United States focus upon the Asia-Pacific region" (even though he also favours a stronger UK role in Asia). European economies that are less reliant on trade

with Asia, such as Spain or Belgium, are equally amenable to this argument. In particular, southern European countries – which fear spill-over from developments in North Africa – back it for reasons of national security. A transatlantic division of labour however, raises questions of practicality: Can Europe secure its neighbourhood without US support? It also risks weakening the transatlantic bond over time.

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A fourth group argues that European security is a casualty of the US pivot. They point to US defence budget cuts and a concomitant military realignment which has reduced the US military's presence in Europe. The last US tank has left European soil, as has the last anti-tank aircraft. In March 2013 the US said it would not deploy the fourth phase of a planned European missile shield (although it is helping to build the first three phases), but announced it would boost Japan's protection against a North Korean ballistic threat. Central and Eastern European governments that feel threatened by Russia's assertive foreign policy have expressed their concern. Unsurprisingly, Estonia and Poland are among the few European NATO allies that are increasing their defence spending. These states urge NATO to re-emphasise its traditional role in collective defence, and are unconvinced that other European states could credibly replace a US withdrawal.

To date, a confused mixture of these four perspectives has produced European prevarication, some national bilateral efforts and a focus on short-term trade promotion in Asia. Lack of ambition and humility may be an accurate description of the current state of the European strategic debate, but Europe is risking irrelevance.

Two strategic questions must be considered. How can the EU and its member-states contribute to a balance of power in Asia that is conducive to European security interests? And how will Europe's position on Asian security affairs affect its relationship with the US? Another EU-US summit is long overdue, and Europe should start formulating answers. In December, European heads of state will discuss the state of Europe's defence and security policy; the pivot should be on the agenda as well.

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