Europe and America in Asia: Different Beds, Same Dreams

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Michael Yahuda

The subtitle refers to an old Chinese saying about incompatible partners who share the same bed but have different dreams and aspirations.

In this case I will argue that Europeans and Americans in the post-Cold War era do not share the same beds in Asia. The United States is deeply enmeshed in all the main security issues that involve the use or threat of military force concerning the region, while the Europeans are largely noticeable by their absence. Perhaps it should be added in parenthesis that as naval powers, Britain and France do maintain a presence from time to time in East Asian waters. France, of course, still has a presence on some Pacific islands and Britain is still a party to the Five Power Defense Arrangement including Malaysia, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand. But it is doubtful whether either would claim to contribute materially to the key security issues in the region. Nevertheless the Europeans, as representatives of what might be called a civil power, do have claims to contribute to the security of the region, but they clearly do so in different ways from the United States. The Europeans and the Americans are also competitors in the Asian market and they often accuse the other of unfair practice. Nevertheless I will argue that both Americans and Europeans share similar goals and expectations with regard to developments in Asia. Indeed in the post 9/11 environment there appears to be a growing convergence of views and even of policies. This has survived the recent transatlantic acrimony over the Bush Administration's unilaterism and the deep fissures over Iraq. Let me give but one recent example—of the first 11 countries that signed up in May 2003 to the Proliferation Security Initiative designed to intercept ships suspected of carrying WMD and drug shipments that was proposed by President Bush with North Korea principally in mind, eight were European and the only one that sent forces to participate in the first military exercises was, remarkably, France. Considering that many regard the initiative as of dubious legality and as an example of the much-criticized doctrine of pre-emption, it is surprising that the European and French active participation has received little attention.2

Generally speaking, however, the congruity between European and American approaches to Asia
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is all the more remarkable for being uncoordinated. Both Americans and Europeans take pride in the growing institutionalization of their various relationships in Asia, yet little or any regular exchanges of views take place between Europeans and Americans on Asian affairs. I will argue later that both sides would benefit from establishing a pattern of dialogues at various levels, both formal and informal, to address matters of common interest in Asia.

Before proceeding further it would be useful to clarify how the geographical terms ‘Europe’ and ‘Asia’ are used in this context. To take the latter first, the geographical scope will be limited to that used by EU documents, which is restricted to Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia. ‘Europe’ is more difficult. Although it is tempting these days to think of Europe as the EU, even after the proposed enlargement of the European Union to include 25 states the EU will not speak for Europe as a whole. Not only does that exclude countries such as the Ukraine, but it also excludes the EU’s largest economic partner after the US—Switzerland. Nevertheless, for the purposes here, I shall confine the concept of Europe to the EU and its members.

It should be recognized that the EU is a highly complex and in many ways an inefficient international actor. Not only is there always a question as to the balance to be drawn between the separate identities and activities of member states and that of the Union, but also the EU itself, with its different and overlapping institutions is not well organized to deal with foreign affairs. Even if the EU were able to agree upon a new constitution and upon the appointment of a single representative to take charge of foreign affairs the EU would still be unable to act as a coherent and consistent unit in the foreign policy realm. The current Commissioner for External Affairs, Christopher Patten, has more than once described the declared Foreign Common and Security Policy as being what member states have in common—which is hardly an indication of coherence and purpose. The one area of external relations in which the EU has been relatively effective is trade. The EU speaks with one voice; positions are agreed within the key internal institutions involving separate member states so that its Trade Commissioner is able to negotiate effectively on behalf of the EU in the WTO with other states and organizations. Yet even here the EU itself is organized to negotiate terms of trade on behalf of its members, while the trade itself is conducted by member states and by the business firms based in them. In fact the bulk of EU trade is conducted within the Union and members and their companies compete with each other as much as with non-EU members in external trade.

The difficulties in developing a coherent and consistent Common Foreign and Security Policy are too well known to require further explanation here. Indeed over the years there has developed what has been called a ‘capabilities and expectations gap’ that has widened and narrowed. In part it has to do with actual foreign policy resources that can be put in place and kept coherent and consistent in terms of the unexpected challenges thrown-up in the post cold War period and in part it has to do with the range of expectations. In the early 1990s institutional innovation led to exaggerated expectations that were cruelly exposed in the course of the various crises of former Yugoslavia. Arguably, the gap then narrowed as expectations fell perhaps too low. The fault lines that emerged over the Iraq issue have hardly helped even as the EU is taking institutional steps to enhance its CFSP. However, it is important to recognize that the
EU is still a project in the making, so that its policies and institutions should be assessed in terms of a process of evolution, rather than as representative of enduring positions and structures. In dealing with current issues member states promote their interests with an eye as to how that will affect the future evolution of the EU as they jealously guard existing prerogatives. At the same time these are weighed in the balance of whether or not they favor the much disputed federal direction.

The EU in Asia

Yet as far as Asia is concerned, the EU may be said to have fared better than elsewhere. As distant neighbors, Europeans and Asians do not directly and immediately impinge on the other’s most pressing and immediate concerns. Their relations generate less controversy and it is easier for all sides to take the longer view. Arguably the EU has been able to express its voice or international identity with greater clarity here than elsewhere. But that too has not been without its difficulties. For example, in the mid 1990s the EU tried unsuccessfully to balance concerns with Chinese human rights failings with its pursuit of commercial advantage. Until 1996 EU members regularly supported attempts to table a resolution at the annual Geneva conference on human rights condemning the Chinese government’s poor record. But then divisions occurred leaving Denmark and the Netherlands exposed as co-sponsors of the resolution and therefore subject to Chinese retaliation. Thereafter EU members followed the French lead in favoring the cultivation of a dialogue on the subject with the Chinese as opposed to what the Chinese called ‘confrontation.’ This is a position similar to that adopted by other American allies such as Australia and Japan. Even the United States, which adopts a more openly critical stance, has had its problems in balancing concerns about Chinese human rights failings with the pursuit of other interests. So perhaps the EU should not be judged too harshly. However, it was notable that the EU did not display solidarity with the unfortunate Danes and Dutch. Moreover the EU was fortunate that the Chinese did not choose to put to the test Leon Brittan’s warning that the EU would not allow the Chinese side to discriminate against British trade as punishment for the way the last governor handled Hong Kong. Interestingly, although the EU now claims to enjoy a mature partnership with the PRC, it is still dissatisfied with its approach to human rights. Its latest statement issued earlier this year calls for making a real difference “on the ground”—an implicit admission that it has not been able to make much difference so far.

Despite the fact that neither the EU nor its members impinge directly on the security issues of the region, they have nevertheless been able to use such resources as they have to influence the security domain in a reasonable and coherent manner. For example, so far European arms suppliers, including Britain, France, Germany, Sweden and others have not sold weaponry or dual use technology in ways that could undermine existing balances of power. But as will be discussed below, the EU is considering its response to China’s request that it lift the embargo. Apart from the embargo itself, such sales were also banned under an EU code of conduct forbidding the sale of weaponry to countries that carried out gross violations of human rights and/or that were engaged or threatening to engage in military conflict. Seemingly that ruled out China because of the Taiwan issue.

Before looking at EU policies in greater detail it might be worthwhile sketching out the significance of
the EU in Asia. In economic terms, the EU is a major player in Asia. Trade in 2000 was calculated at Euro 505 billion (nearly $600 billion at the rate of exchange of October 10, 2003) so that the EU’s commercial relations with Asia are of critical significance to the prosperity of both regions. Like America, the EU has a huge trade deficit with Asia amounting to E121.5 billion (or $148bn). In the year 2000 the EU was beginning to be squeezed by China as Japan’s second largest trading partner after the US. Nevertheless total trade still came to over E132 billion. In the same year EU trade with China reached E95.7 billion. Interestingly by the end of 2002 the value of trade with Japan had dropped to E110 billion whereas that with China had reached E115 billion, making China the EU’s most valued trade partner in Asia, second in importance only to trade with the US. By the end of 2003 the Chinese were confidently predicting that their trade with the EU would soon exceed in value their trade with the US. The EU trade with the dynamic Asian economies was valued in 1999 at over E170 billion, placing the EU in third position after the US and China, but before Japan.9

The point of these statistics is to show that the EU is a major player in the economies of the region and this is of increasing importance in the new security agendas of the post-Cold War period. And as we shall see, the EU is fully alert to these policy implications.

EU Asia Policies

Let me now turn to look at actual EU policies. Although key members of the EU had both first and second track dialogues of long standing with Japan and South Korea, while the EU itself had formal agreements with ASEAN as a regional trading partner, formal policy statements by the executive branch of the EU, its Commission, were formulated only after the end of the Cold War.10 The demise of the Soviet Union and the changing circumstances in Asia were seen as requiring a new approach.11 It will be recalled that as a result of Tiananmen, the EU countries, at their Madrid summit in 1989, imposed similar sanctions on China as the US. Beginning a year later these were gradually lifted, except for the arms embargo, but it was not until the aftermath of German reunification that the EU first began to recognize the need to make a determined effort to participate in the economic dynamism of East Asia and China in particular. Germany was the principal architect of the new approach. The Treaty of Maastricht of February 1992 that laid the groundwork for the new CFSP also made this possible. The EU Commission produced policy documents on China and Asia. Called, ‘Towards a New Asia Strategy,’ the EU’s policy statement was designed to strengthen Europe’s economic presence in the region and to ensure that its interests would be fully taken into account. It further aimed to contribute to stability by promoting international cooperation and supporting the regional groupings. It hoped to associate Asian countries in the management of international affairs and encourage them to be more active multilaterally to maintain peace and security. On economic issues the EU pledged to “pursue all actions necessary” to ensure open markets and a non-discriminatory business environment and to integrate into the open market-based world trading systems those Asian countries moving from state controls to market-oriented economies. It also advanced the goal of alleviating poverty and promoting sustainable development and it finally hoped to contribute to the “development and consolidation of
democracy and the rule of law, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in Asia.”

These objectives have been re-endorse repeatedly in subsequent years. One of the most recent on September 4, 2001 added the call to build global partnerships and alliances with Asian countries ... to help address both the challenges and the opportunities offered by globalization and to strengthen our joint efforts on global environmental and security issues.”

Lest these be considered significant primarily at the level of rhetoric, it is important to recognize that the EU has devoted significant resources to Asia. The EU (which is the largest source of Official Development Assistance in the world, accounting for 48 percent world wide, as against 16 percent from the US) is the second largest donor in Asia. It provides 30 percent as against Japan’s 51 percent. In the period 1976-2000 the EU provided over E6 billion ODA to Asian countries. The EU has also developed a variety of programs in China and Southeast Asia to promote better governance, the rule of law, democracy, the spread of education, welfare and so on. In 2003 the EU Commission calculated that programs it is currently running in China involve annual expenditures of E260 million. These involve a range of programs including the training of judges, helping to improve prison management, supporting experiments in village democracy, running an advanced business management college, helping universities to focus on European studies and to conduct exchange programs with European equivalents, assisting in poverty alleviation, contributing to measures to halt desertification and so on. Much effort is devoted to assisting in improving the regulatory frameworks in China in areas of finance, customs administration, the implementation of WTO rules, the improvement of the modalities of investment, etc. Exchanges have been promoted on social security issues, public housing, the development of civil society and so on.

As these initiatives got going, the EU established institutionalized exchanges and dialogues not only through multilateral settings, but also through partnerships with large countries such as China and India in addition to the long-standing one with Japan. Moreover, at the initiative of Singapore biannual summit meetings of Asian and European leaders, called ASEM was set up in 1996. This was consciously seen as a means of balancing the US, or in the language of the day, strengthening the European side of the triangle of America, Asia and Europe. This was at the time of the debates about Asian values that had been sparked by the first Clinton Administration’s declared policy of enlarging the scope of the free market and democracy that intentionally or not led erstwhile friends such as Malaysia and Singapore to feel that their political systems were being singled out for criticism. A strong sentiment in Brussels took the view that to be distinctive European foreign policy had to take up positions that were separate from the United States. Hence there was a predisposition in favor of encouraging the emergence of multipolarity as a means of keeping American supremacy in check. Ironically, the Asian financial crisis of the following year brought to an end any feasibility of a Euro-Asian partnership of this sort, just at a time when many in Asia came to resent what was called the Washington consensus that damaged their recovery through its emphasis on tight money and the importance of safeguarding the interests of external lenders even though many were no less speculative and irresponsible than those in Asian capitals who were blamed for crony capitalism. The financial crisis proved to be a grave setback to Asian
self-confidence, while the Europeans found out that American structural power as expressed through its dominance of the key international organizations was the thing that counted. The fact that the European investments and banking activities in Southeast Asia exceeded those of the US counted for little in the end.\(^{17}\)

Nevertheless for Asians and for China in particular, the EU continued to be a means of balancing off dependency on the US. The European markets, as noted earlier were attractive and were more or less equivalent in character to those of North America. As noted earlier, the EU in the year 2000, conducted $600 billion worth of trade with Asia of which exports from Asia came to $372 billion. Europe also offers an alternative as a source for advanced technology, investment, financial know-how and so on. In that sense Europe is a natural competitor of the US and although Boeing and the European Airbus companies might disagree, there can be little doubt that that kind of competition is entirely fair and proper and congruent with the rules of the global trading system.

Similarly, it can be argued that the promotion by the EU of cooperative security in the post-Cold War era as a means of diffusing tensions and promoting the settlement of disputes is entirely proper. Moreover it does not necessarily conflict with American approaches to security in Asia through its various deployments and its series of military alliances. In fact the European approach has gained salience as the nature of security has widened to include transnational issues such as preventing the spread of diseases such as HIV/AIDS, SARS, combating trafficking in drugs and people by international crime syndicates, tackling environmental degradation and the depletion of resources such as those at sea.

**Security Hot Spots**

At this point it might be worth looking at what role if any the EU or its members have played in the major security questions that developed in Asia since the end of the Cold War. As already mentioned, they maintained an arms embargo against the PRC that has held so far despite some slippage on dual use technology. But the Europeans, for example, have not helped provide the Chinese with sophisticated weaponry that could tilt the military balance across the Taiwan Strait. In fact they have sold weapons to the other side. In 1991 France sold Mirage jets and Lafayette frigates to Taiwan, much to the chagrin of the Chinese. There has not been a question of any European supplier following in such a high profile way since. We need only recall how each of the possible builders of diesel submarines refused in 2001 to build such vessels for the US that would be destined for Taiwan. Yet the EU added its voice to the few who publicly condemned the PRC’s attempt to intimidate Taiwan with the firing of missiles off shore from its main ports in 1995-96.

Although many of its member states established offices in Taipei, the EU did not do so for a long time, even though Taiwan was an important trading partner of EU countries. Taiwan ranks third in value in Asia after Japan and the PRC with trade in 2002 worth £32.7. For a long time it seemed as if the EU was so beholden to the PRC that it refused to take any position on Taiwan other than opposing Beijing’s use of force. Indeed a search of EU web sites in the year 2000 did not turn up a single reference to Taiwan. However, following Taiwan’s accession to the WTO, Christopher Patten (who since becoming External Relations Commissioner of the EU was invited to Beijing as the personal guest of Jiang Zemin himself who declared
that having made a special study of Patten’s speeches recognized that he was an ‘old friend of the Chinese people’) found it necessary to explain in January 2003 that the ‘One China’ policy can still accommodate EU relations with Taiwan. Three months later the EU finally established a trade and cultural office in Taipei. In its policy statement on Taiwan it called for a peaceful resolution and the resumption of a ‘constructive dialogue’ and the ‘eschewing of dogmatic positions.’ The EU was even so bold as to declare that any arrangement between Beijing and Taipei requires ‘reference also to the wishes of the Taiwanese population.’

With regard to Korea, the EU and its members have tried to indicate their support for a peaceful settlement by participating in the financing of KEDO, and more materially by providing assistance to North Korea. Some European states took advantage of the window of opportunity provided during the last year of the Clinton presidency to establish diplomatic relations with North Korea. Associated with that, a good number of EU-supported NGO’s went to the North to help in the distribution of food and medicine. Some are still there. Undoubtedly if there should be some kind of settlement the Europeans will seek to play a role in helping to address the immense economic and social problems that will ensue.

These do not add up to heroic roles, but they are nevertheless constructive and in keeping with the capacities and values of the EU.

The Impact of 9/11

9/11 has had the effect of bringing European and American positions closer together in Asia. To be sure it is not 9/11 and the issue of terrorism alone. Internal developments within Europe have also contributed to this. Thus the pressure to enhance the security dimension of the desired independent CFSP has pushed the EU in the person of Javier Solana, the EU’s High Representative for the CFSP, to issue a statement on security on its behalf. In September this year he defined a security strategy for Europe which put much stress on the dangers of terrorism, fuelled by regional conflicts, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and collusion between terrorists and international criminal organizations. In addition to meeting the challenge of peace and security in the European neighborhood by creating what he called a ‘circle of good governance’ on the European periphery, he envisaged out of area activities and going beyond the UN Security Council if necessary to tackle the proliferation of WMD. He particularly emphasized the importance of the trans-Atlantic link and called for the strengthening of partnerships with Russia, Japan, China and India due to their important security role “in their respective regions and beyond.” The EU also issued a “Declaration of the Non-Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction” in order “to deter, halt and, where possible, reverse proliferation programs of concern worldwide.” For the first time the use of force was not excluded as a last resort when political and diplomatic measures have failed. In another statement on Iran’s nuclear program, the EU warned Tehran against the development of nuclear weapons and even threatened to suspend its economic, trade and cooperation programs. Later that year the three leading members of the EU, Germany, France and the UK, persuaded Iran to submit its nuclear program to inspection by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Meanwhile China issued its own White Paper on Europe, which dwelt on the significance of the
partnership in several important respects, including the political as well as the economic. It concluded with a formal request that the EU lift its arms embargo. It soon won the support of the leaders of Germany and France in particular. But some member states expressed misgivings on account of China’s poor human rights record, suggesting that the code of conduct would not allow the resumption of sales. A meeting of the foreign ministers of EU member states is due to decide upon the issue in the spring of 2004 and unanimity would be required. At a time of increased tensions in cross Strait relations this would be a particularly bad moment from a US perspective for the EU to lift the embargo and the US government has made its views known. It would clearly be a grave setback for American strategy in East Asia if the EU were to decide to resume such sales.

**The Need for EU-US dialogues on Asia**

Despite their differences the EU and the US are natural allies. They share common values and in their different ways they project them onto Asia. The long stated aims of the EU sound as if they were drafted in Washington rather than in the chancellies of Europe. They include encouraging the respect for human rights, the observance of the rule of law, the promotion of democracy and the sustaining of an open trade system. Derived from the experience of the development of the EU itself, these are seen as ultimately the only guarantee of a durable peace that will give rise to stable societies with good governance. In the long run that alone will enable the new international security agenda of international terror, transnational crime, environmental degradation and so on to be properly addressed. Central to this approach is EU policy towards China. Called “Constructive Engagement” the policy is designed to encourage further reforms in China’s domestic governance so that as the country continues to rise in regional and international significance it will conform more and more to these values. The EU sees itself as actively encouraging China to participate in international and regional multilateral organizations that promote an open trading system and cooperative security.

As I have already argued, the European approach reflects the particular experience of the development of the European Union which has finally brought to an end the scourge of inter-state warfare that has blighted the continent since the emergence of the Westphalian system in the 17th century after the long religious wars that preceded it. That in part explains why the Europeans understood the peace dividend of the ending of the Cold War to mean the slashing of military budgets. Moreover even though the European states collectively spend $160 billion on defense, much of that is wasted on duplication and the maintenance of out-dated armed forces. There is neither the energy, nor the inclination to address the complexities of addressing these problems, as they would involve tackling head on the intractability of merging separate national defense forces at a time when the issue of Federalism remains unsettled and deeply divisive. The result is that the huge technological military gap between the US and its European allies continue to grow exponentially. That however raises many problems for NATO, but in my view it should not raise too many problems for potential EU-US cooperation in Asia.

The differences between the two sides in Asia are not incompatible and, as we have seen, they are narrowing in the post 9/11 environment. If the EU position has moved closer to that of the US in dealing with terrorism, non-proliferation and even pre-emption
as with the Proliferation Security Initiative, arguably the reverse is also true. The US no longer opposes multilateral approaches to security in Asia. Indeed it encourages them as with regard to North Korea, while it offers tacit if not enthusiastic support to the beginnings of security cooperation in the South China Sea. The EU and the US by and large share similar aspirations regarding the rise of China. Even those in Washington who still view a rising China as a strategic competitor presumably do not object and perhaps even support the EU aspirations to what it regards as a partner. The EU goal is simply to encourage better governance including respect for the rule of law and fundamental human rights and to promote where possible movement towards democracy at home, while encouraging China’s active participation in international institutions so as to enmesh and integrate the country more deeply into international society.

Given the repositioning of great powers currently taking shape in Asia involving Japan, India and even Russia as well as China and the attendant uncertainties, there would seem to be a greater need for closer cooperation between the EU and the US. Combating terrorism, proliferation and the various new transnational security issues is already bringing about a kind of piecemeal cooperation, for example in introducing tighter financial controls to limit the financing of terrorist and the operation of transnational criminal gangs. But more cooperation and coordination would obviously be beneficial.

The EU and the US do have regular high level meetings, but these are usually focused on transatlantic matters. If the two sides can conduct separately layered institutionalized dialogues with their respective Asian partners it is a mystery as to why so little takes place between the two sides over Asia. Officials from the Clinton Administration with responsibility for Asia rarely interacted with the British equivalents, let alone with other allies in Europe. That neglect appears to have continued into the Bush Administration. The Secretary of State, Colin Powell, found it necessary to urge the Europeans in a public statement not to lift the arms embargo as requested by China. His having done so in public suggested that there were no institutional or regular mechanisms in place for cross-Atlantic deliberations on East Asia.

Fortunately, there is some activity of the track II variety. For example, Professor Shambaugh of this institution has taken the initiative to establish a regular dialogue of this kind that brings together European and American academics and officials in their personal capacities to meet on a regular basis every 18 months to discuss matters relating to China. To my knowledge there is no other equivalent except as may happen through serendipity in occasional conferences. There is clearly a need for more initiatives of the Shambaugh kind.

Perhaps to conclude in the terms with which I began, it is time for the Europeans and the Americans to move their respective beds in Asia closer together.
NOTES

* Based on lecture given at the Sigur Center for Asian Studies, The Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University, October 10, 2003.

1. Dating from 1971 when it was designed as a mechanism to provide for the defense of Malaysia and Singapore, the arrangement now entails little more than limited military exercises on an annual basis.

2. See the accounts in BBC News and CNN.com of September 13, 2003.


4. See Peterson and Sjursen (op.cit.).


8. As agreed on May 15, 1998 by the foreign ministers of the 15 member states of the EU. For a summary and analysis see, the account by BASIC in http://www.basicin.org/WT/armsexp/BSW_factsheet.htm. Interestingly, in its first formal paper on relations with the EU, the PRC states that it wanted the arms embargo removed. Nevertheless both France and Germany have sold the Chinese engines for their naval ships.


10. See for example, the account of relations with Japan, Nuttall, S.J., “Japan and Europe: Policies and initiatives” in Bert Edstrom (ed.), Japan’s foreign and security policies in transition (Stockholm: The Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 1997).


14. Figures drawn from the same document.


16. See the discussions in various chapters by leading European and Asian experts in Hans Maull, Gerald Segal and Jusuf Wanandi (eds.) Europe and the Asia Pacific (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).


21. Doc. 10354/03 PESC 316 CONOP 19 CODUN 18 CODUN 13 COTER 24 and an “action plan” endorsed by the Council.

