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## Rethinking Asia-Europe Security Cooperation

By Michael Raska

### Synopsis

*East Asia in 2014 is increasingly compared to Europe in 1914: a region beset by great power rivalry, obsessed with military power and arms races and on the brink of conflict. This is reviving new debates on the applicability of not only the European model and experiences in building cooperative security but also the EU's greater strategic involvement in East Asia.*

### Commentary

EAST ASIA's emerging strategic landscape is becoming progressively more complex. There is the increasing convergence of both conventional security focused on preservation of deterrence and defence, and a spectrum of unconventional security challenges ranging from environmental, energy and human security, to cyber security issues that have a potential for unprecedented spillover effects on the entire global system.

The principal sources of regional tensions are embedded in the confluence of unresolved historical legacies, emerging great power rivalries, and intensifying territorial disputes that fuel continuing strategic mistrust. East Asia's core security flashpoints such as the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Straits, territorial disputes in the East China and South China Seas, and emerging Sino-US strategic competition are also amplified by accelerating regional military modernisation and diffusion of advanced weapons platforms and technologies.

### Asia-Europe security cooperation debate

Notwithstanding East Asia's rising economic prosperity and increasingly important role in global diplomacy, its principal challenge remains intact: building more forward-looking and credible political institutions that are able to rapidly transform early warning signals into viable policy prescriptions. In other words, relying on effective multilateral security mechanisms that would not only enhance the existing regional security arrangements, but more importantly, assure reconciliation, cooperation, and stable peace in the future.

In this context, European security transformation from collective defence to cooperative security continues to resonate important lessons for East Asia. It is precisely because entrenched security problems exist in the Asia-Pacific region that more attention must be turned to enhancing preventive diplomacy, multilateral security dialogues, and addressing latent, but potentially critical, threats to regional security.

For over a decade, however, there has been a debate on the applicability of the European model and experiences in the process of building viable multilateral security mechanisms in East Asia. The predominant view has been that historical trajectories, geographical distance, and security environment in East Asia and

Europe vary significantly. Thus European lessons with building co-operative security cannot simply be transferred or applied to the security building of East Asia.

In particular, for the past 60 years, strategic stability in East Asia has been maintained by robust defence alliances created and led by the United States after World War II, which included the deployment of US forces in key forward bases in South Korea and Japan, implementation of arms control initiatives to deter, contain, and minimise the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Hence, there was no substantial need for building alternative multilateral security mechanisms and institutions.

Secondly, the institutional structure of European organisations is not in tune with the dominant political culture of East Asia. In this context, the processes associated with European integration have been perceived as too legalistic, formal, and rules-based for East Asian states that made consensus-building and informal discussions the cornerstone of their approach to regional security co-operation.

Thirdly, European process of integrating co-operative security mechanisms and collective identity has a substantial head start, with a long history of community building efforts, high degree of cultural cohesion, and dense networks of institutional, cultural and social linkages, while East Asia does not have any of these traits.

### **European pivot to Asia?**

For its part, the European Union has been rethinking its overall diplomatic engagement with East Asia, both in terms of presence and policies. The diverse range includes unprecedented number of visits by the Presidents of the European Council and Commission; bilateral Asian Summits with China, Korea, India, and Japan; strengthening EU-ASEAN relations; joint EU-US statement on cooperating in and with the Asia-Pacific region; EU's participation in regional security forums such as the Shangri-La Dialogue; and new policy initiatives to cooperate on security issues such as piracy and cybersecurity.

The 2012 *Guidelines on the EU's Foreign and Security Policy in East Asia* are often emphasised by the European External Action Service as a roadmap for strengthening EU-Asia security cooperation, including tackling common cross-border challenges such as counter-piracy, cyber-security, maritime security, energy security, environmental security and natural disaster response. Other areas include conflict mediation, and potential military contribution in East Asia.

The key challenge for their implementation, however, remains in three major contradictions: while China perceives European security initiatives with suspicion in terms of EU complementing US strategic rebalancing vis-à-vis China, the US is skeptical about European 'soft power' and its ability to shape regional security, and the EU itself is divided amid lack of its military capabilities.

### **Convergence of interests**

The modus operandi of the European experience with preventive diplomacy through a "culture of dialogue", arms control initiatives, and confidence-building measures are still relevant for the "Asian Way" of building regional multilateral security frameworks.

Even at the height of the Cold War, when Western Europe remained firmly embedded within NATO, Europe has pursued alternative security mechanisms that emphasised dialogue, the search for a common security denominator, confidence-building measures, and the path toward more lasting security framework in Europe. In the process, European states converged their security interests in dependable expectations of peaceful change in intra-regional relations, while ruling out the use of force as means of problem-solving in inter-member relations.

Accordingly, learning to perceive security dynamics outside of the regional context, building early warning capacities that could prevent mid to longer-term problems for the region, and strengthening the Asian-European linkages can be seen as "positive security niches". These could result in significant dividends for both Asia and Europe.

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