

What place for Asia in the EU's Global Strategy? And, which role for the EU in Asia? Any at all?

Introduction

Over the past ten years the European Union's (EU) enlargement and institutional reforms, not least of its external action have consumed a lot of the attention and energy of European policy makers, and since 2008 the focus has been on the European sovereign debt crisis. The agenda of the EU common foreign and security policy (CFSP) has been largely dominated by the member states' engagement in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the anti-piracy operation off the Somali shores. In the meantime East Asia – with emerging China and the ensuing changes in the regional political dynamics and its global repercussions – has crystallized as a strategic arena, decisive for international economic development, stability, and peace.

Unlike Europe, Asia has no 'superstructure' and no underlying canon of common values, giving bilateral structures, especially regarding traditional security-issues, more weight. This piece of evidence sheds some light on the inner workings of Asia-Europe relations and explores by what means effective multilateralism can be achieved and how it is connected to international cooperation and development. The question this paper addresses is thus whether the EU's efforts to promote multilateral global governance structures and international development by emphasizing region-to-region interaction and thereby promulgating its own model of regional integration in other geographic areas can be successful in an Asian context, where the rivalry between the US and China result in power politics and heightened security concerns. The presence of a regional hegemon and the absence of an existential threat are rendering it unlikely that Asia will establish effective regional governance mechanisms (Warleigh-Lack 2008). "Geopolitically, this means that the task facing Asian regionalism is Herculean in comparison to that seen during the European project" (Breslin and Wilson 2015: 128). Europe's policy of multilateral engagement as a 'norm entrepreneur' may work as a buffer and add a 'soft pole', with the focus on international norms and regime building, thereby easing frictions between the two 'hard-power players'. By showing what 'orchestration' (Abbott et al. 2015) can do for global public policy-making, this piece of evidence highlights potential venues for inter-regional engagement to the benefit of economic development, as well as regional security and stability. The lines of investigation are: What are the conditions conducive to multilateralism? When and why are actors inclined to actively engage in interregional endeavours?

To answer these questions the paper examines the EU's ambitions to promote innovative elements of global public policy and emerging governance structures pertinent to international security, human rights, conflict management, trade and development, with evidence from both EU-Asia and intra-Asian cooperation. Particular importance is thereby given to the connection between traditional forms and aims of foreign policy and the specific characteristics and needs of development and humanitarian policies, the security-development nexus as well as the development-trade nexus. Without security, comprising the dimensions of traditional and non-traditional security issues as well as human security, beyond the immediate absence of violent conflict, it is impossible to create sustainable development and public welfare; on the other hand, in order to create lasting peace and stability, it is necessary to build resilient communities, maintaining economic activities to sustain the livelihoods of local populations. Equitable trade in turn increases the chances for prosperity, whilst at the same time peace

and a certain economic level are necessary to enter into fair and mutually beneficial exchange of goods and services. Finally, states, societies or ethnic groups tied together by trade relations, enabling and securing the livelihoods of their populations are also less likely to resort to violence to manage social or political conflicts, and to fall victim to fragilization or institutional failure. The specific challenge lies in ensuring policy coherence, and at the same time guaranteeing the prerogatives and independence of development and humanitarian policies. Considering China's dominant role in the region and its struggle for power and influence in various contexts, Chinese development policy, in Asia as well as in other parts of the world, has given rise to suspicion as to both its intentions and outcomes, and has been seen a means of primarily securing its own political and economic interests (cf. Breslin 2015). Simultaneously, given the current soaring of tensions, in the South East China Sea, a peaceful and prosperous Asia is of European strategic interest in terms of international security and global economic development.

The EU's regional approach to Asia

The EU strategy towards Asia aims at mutual involvement of partners on both sides across a variety of regional institutions, governance structures and fora of cooperation, such as ASEAN, Asian Regional Forum (ARF), the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), or the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Thereby the EU also seeks to increase coordination among Asian countries. It is a deliberate policy choice of a 'normative power Europe' (Manners 2002) as well as that of a 'market power' Europe (Damro 2012) to foster political and economic stability and development, to de-escalate confrontation and solve conflicts and crises. At the same time, over the last decades the EU has tried to reproduce its model of regional integration in other parts of the world (Murray 2010).

In conducting its external relations, during the 1990s and early 2000s the EU developed a preference to deal with third countries collectively, to lay out regional strategies, aid programs, specific agreements with countries in a particular region, and thereby encourages regional groupings. This was a 'natural choice' as the EU had reached the deepest degree of regional integration worldwide. "The extent to which the EU groups countries together on a regional basis is a striking and unusual feature of its foreign relations; no other international actor does this to the same extent" (Smith 2014: 69). These inter-regional relations are handled in varying formats, differing in intensity and broadness of approach. However, promoting regionalism and even shaping regions by externalization of the EU's own principles of functioning has been interpreted as 'euro-centric', as a feature of "narcissism" or "a propensity [of the EU] to reproduce itself" (Smith 2014: 70). The *pro*-argument for classifying countries together and supporting regional groupings is fostering awareness of transnational problems and interdependence, as well as achieving effective multilateralism and contributing to a multipolar world. Recent tendencies of integration and centralization within ASEAN and a creeping institutionalization of the cooperation among its member states are probably a consequence of the regionalization-support provided by the EU over the last 20 years. Possibly as a result, ASEAN is more integrated at the institutional level than ever before and more closely resembles the EU. Now the 'ASEAN Community (AC)' comprises three communities (like the former European Communities, predecessors of the European Union), consisting of (1) an economic, (2) a society and culture, and (3) a security pillar. The new role and position of the ASEAN's Secretary General (SG), represents the most significant innovation. The SG, to some extent became a supranational figure, typical of the EU, and now sits at the negotiating table with member state representatives and is authorized to represent the AC position.¹ Taking a certain path dependency in the organizational evolution of international

¹ See also Association of Southeast Asian Nations (SAARC), 'Roadmap for an ASEAN Community (2009-2015)', Jakarta,

bureaucracies into account, some degree of homogenization or emulation of EU structures may be attested and more isomorphism may be expected.

EU's 'supralateralism'

Even though member states remain the principal actors behind the EU foreign policy also the specific organizational characteristics of the EU's new external affairs administration influences the design and implementation of foreign policies. International bureaucracies, such as the European External Action Service (EEAS), put in charge of coordinating, devising and conducting EU outward directed policies, may bias administrative decision-making and introduce a supranational 'action orientation' into the process of EU preference formation (Henökl 2015, Henökl and Trondal 2015, Simon 1972). Such a latent supranationalism dominating the behavioural dynamics of the EU's foreign policy bureaucracy may play a particularly important role in combination with the EU's predilection for the region-to-region component of its interaction with Asia. Rooted in the EU's internal experience with deliberation and coalition-building processes, a natural inclination towards negotiated order has been seen as an explanation for the EU's 'compulsive multilateralism' (Smith, M.H. 2013: 668). This inclination may further help 'governance transfer' (Börzel 2013, 2015) and the export of European practices of coordination and cooperation, institutions of consensus building, agenda shaping as well as the creation of administrative capacity at the regional level.

Due to system-inherent mechanisms the EU has become the most prominent promoter of inter-regionalism worldwide (Murray 2010), by actively encouraging and directly supporting such processes, but also by creating secondary incentives and indirect benefits for adopting 'EU-like' or EU-compatible structures in a mimetic fashion. Exercising such homogenization pressure towards isomorphistic adoption of a model, considered legitimate and successful – at least, as long as it is (or was) successful, i.e. 1992-2008 – is a natural behavioural trait, built into the Union's organizational matrix. Lifting and co-opting multilateral ambitions to the supranational level, and conceiving and framing them as a prerogative of the Union is clearly a policy preference pre-determined by the organizational choice-structure; thus 'supralateralism' is understood here to denominate the phenomenon of attracting and co-opting the competence and to embrace the discursive leadership for multilateralism by the EU level, as a behavioural preference engrained in the EU's administrative decision-making premises (Henökl 2015).

The 2015 "Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council - The EU and ASEAN: a partnership with a strategic purpose"² launching the initiative for the first strategic partnership with a non-state actor, may provide an opportunity to ask whether Europe's supralateralism has become less attractive with the Euro-crisis or whether the measures adopted to secure European economic and financial stability are recognized as being an example of successful or adequate crisis management, witnessing of European solidarity and loyalty, as a model of reliable and steadfast mutual support. Michael H. Smith (2013: 662) suggests that the EU's external influence "has been damaged by the revelation of its own vulnerability in the light of the eurozone debt crisis", and that "the appeal of the EU as an extraregional partner has been tarnished by its internal economic and financial travails" (ibid. 668). Especially the responses of two regional powers in Asia will be of interest here: Japan's and China's reactions may be informing of Asian perceptions of the EU's problem solving capacity and ability of joint crisis management, in short its attractiveness as a partner and as a model to emulate. Despite these difficulties, regional integration may be furthered by institutionalizing inter-

April 2009; available at: www.meti.go.jp/policy/trade_policy/east_asia/dl/ASEANblueprint.pdf

² <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9025-2015-INIT/en/pdf>

regional cooperation, and thereby from the outside entrenching the delimitation of the region, to some extent, defining a geographical space as a *region* by ‘out-of-area spillover’.

Discussing Asia in the EU’s Global Strategy process

In June 2015, the HRVP has launched a scoping paper, to inform the discussions in the run up to the EU’s strategic review, due in 2016. This document, drafted by a working group involving the cabinet of the HRVP as well as senior EEAS officials, is mainly advocating the objective of the comprehensive approach and the need for the EU institutions and the member states to work together. The watchwords of the scoping paper are thus ‘joined-up’ action and holistic or ‘whole of government’ approach.

As a scoping paper for an EU global strategy, it provides a detailed overview of the challenges and complexities, talks about shifts and diffusion of power away from the state etc., but it fails to acknowledge the fundamental geopolitical power transformation that has been going on over the last decade. The language used is sometimes surprisingly casual and refers to “a rounded approach to Asia” without explaining what that might be. Less of a surprise the paper concludes that the EU can no longer afford the 'luxury' of vertical and geographic silos in policy making. EU foreign policy has long been criticized for the divisions and strict separations between policy sectors, a direct effect of the hierarchical organizational structure, with different vertical ‘competence-fiefdoms’, next to each other. Linked to wording as well as to a new efficiency focus, the text contains a lot of austerity-influenced language, emphasizing the urgent need to take action, and insisting on reduced action-capacity due to the financial crisis, alluding to a post-prosperity EU (as opposed to the EU at its peak in 2003 when the first Security Strategy was adopted, and in contrast to a – until recently – rapidly growing China). Alluding to China’s New Silk Road Initiatives and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), established in 2015, the strategy discussion paper explicitly mentions “China’s efforts to develop infrastructural ties with Central and Southeast Asia as well as Europe” and “the growth of regional and sub-regional groupings in East Asia” as a source for dynamism and as the current ‘geo-economic’ mega-trends.

At the same time, this strategic review document adopts a critical tone towards China, with regards to human rights violations and its military assertiveness in the East and South China Sea, identifying it as a potential threat for “trade routes financial flows and a regional order in a part of the world which is of paramount importance to the EU” (EEAS 2015). In fact, the regular soaring of tensions in the South East China Sea challenge a peaceful and prosperous development of Asia as well as international security and global economic stability. The maritime dispute also tests the EU’s credibility to mediate and its capacities to help policing the respect of the rule of international law. With regard to capacities, the strategy paper touches upon the question of upgrading EU defense capabilities but does not make any direct reference to an "EU army" in order to avoid opposition by member states.

The overall assessment is that the document raises a number of important questions and delivers on substantial issues, providing rich material for interesting discussions and further reflections – reflection painstakingly needed in order elaborate a genuine EU-Asia strategy that deserves this name. An informed debate about a European grand strategy needs to address the question whether the EU has or, in the negative case, how it could acquire the capacity to provide leadership in the quest for a negotiated international order as a crucial global public good.

Conclusion: A renewed EU engagement in Asia

EU-Asia interregional relations are a vehicle for the promotion of multilateralism since in essence inter-regionalism is a multilateral process, i.e. ‘a way of acting that involves several states [...] working together as a matter of practice’ (Scott 2013: 31). Japan has long been a partner in different regional and interregional fora (APEC, ASEM, ARF), for China regionalism is a relatively new policy option. So far, it is only part in the ASEAN plus three mechanism (APT, namely ASEAN plus China, South Korea and Japan) and the Shanghai Organization for Cooperation, SOC, an intergovernmental security organization involving China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), as well as in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). Not least because of the US’ pivot to Asia and the Pacific, the strategic importance of regional politics and economic development, decisive for stability, prosperity and global governance, has become clearly visible. EU engagement in Asia, and in particular the ASEAN-EU partnership, may be equally seen as a means of jointly orchestrating multilateral cooperation, international norm-setting and regime building (Henökl and Reiterer 2015). In such a perspective, the EU-ASEAN relationship becomes a venue for orchestration of both sides’ preferences for a multilateral global governance architecture.

On the other hand, the establishment of the AIIB may be seen as a case of successful Chinese orchestrating, especially in view of strengthening its relations with and affirming its influence on the String of Pearls, and providing a funding platform for its New Silk Roads initiative (Renard 2015). A number of states have overlapping, common interests, namely economic development and investments in infrastructure in Asia. This does not exclude the simultaneous existence of side-agendas, driven by divergent particular interests (e.g. counterbalancing the dominance of traditional global financial institutions) or expected political and economic advantages (trade and market access, return on investments etc). Whether China’s AIIB initiative can be seen as signalling a shift in strategy to a new multilateral approach away from its traditional bilateral cooperation remains to be seen. In the light of recent case studies (Henökl and Webersik 2015) this observation is not corroborated – quite the opposite: rather obviously China uses the leverage of the asymmetric relations it has in the cooperation with individual countries to the benefit of its own interests.

Comparing the EU to China begs the question, whether supra-national development cooperation is more effective and sustainable than bi-lateral cooperation. From a recipient point of view, a number of countries have benefited from large-scale Chinese infrastructure projects, as well as from China’s the political and military support. The disadvantages of such relationship are frequently negative terms of trade and a growing debt burden and a potential loss in authority over the control of domestic natural resources. Politically, close relations with China (including military assistance) may compromise relations with other regional powers, such as India, another ‘regional champion’ with great leverage on shaping domestic political and economic affairs.

On the European side, growing dependency of a number of low-income countries on Chinese investment and cooperation activities are increasingly raising concerns among policy makers. While the EU has in the past projected an image of a value-driven actor for global development – although with some discrepancies between discourse and action – it seems now to be awakening to a changing global order, where the promotion of political and economic self-interest has returned to the debate about European foreign policy and its post-2015 development agenda. At the end of the day, the rationale here appears to be that if the EU wants to be a global actor that matters, it has to make sure by promoting its own agenda and interests through its external activities to put itself in a position to be able to shape and influence the future of international cooperation. As China is quickly learning the lessons from its own as well as European successes and failures, Europe will need to invest in

orchestrating its partners worldwide in order to transform its cooperation agenda and particularly the sustainable development goals into a widely shared common interest and to translate them into joint global governance action.

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