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Asia is currently not the top security concern of Europeans with several conflicts raging in our immediate vicinity. Yet it is of the utmost importance in a longer-term perspective. Asia has the world's two most populated nations (China and India), and soon three out of the five largest economies (China, Japan and India).

Regional trends indicate greater defence spending (with India and South Korea now matching the UK and France), a regional arms race (with submarines and short-range missiles having the most destabilising potential), contested maritime spaces (with some parties claiming history trumps international law) and an increasingly disputed regional hegemony.

Asia matters

A Eurasian 'arc of crisis' spans the Middle East, South and Central Asia. The possible collapse of Afghanistan is already fuelling the second-largest inflow of refugees into Europe (after Syria). There are also huge non-conventional security challenges which have the potential to spark an interstate conflict (water scarcity is one, for example).

But Asia also brings opportunities. Persuading rising nations to effectively participate in – and not just pay lip service to – a multilateral world order and thereby contribute to global governance is admittedly no small task. Still, it is a path travelled earlier by Japan and to a lesser extent South Korea. For now, most European efforts are directed at China. However, while other major Asian nations have become significant contributors to the global rules-based order, it is likely that Beijing will continue to only engage in a limited fashion. After all, it is competition which often drives Asian international relations.

In South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, where Europe's relative (although by no means absolute) influence is declining, several Asian countries – China, India, Japan, Korea and Malaysia to name the most obvious – are now key partners. Creating triangles of cooperation would extend and anchor Europe's influence, something that is infinitely preferable to fostering a sense of competition between 'old' and 'new' actors.

In no continent does the security provided by the US matter as much as in Asia. It is not only a keeper of the peace, but also a regional balancer. Yet even in Asia, partners wonder about the future of certain US commitments, while others speculate about its relative decline. Europe has a role to play by furthering the rule of law in international relations and encouraging its use to resolve disputes, as well as enlarging the support base for democratic values. The EU's role is necessarily distinct from that of the US, since the Union is neither bound by bilateral security treaties nor does it possess the hard power capabilities of its transatlantic ally.

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Yet Europe has no less of a stake in the future architecture of the region. It should therefore not minimise its own potential. Countering nuclear proliferation, ensuring freedom of navigation at sea and in the skies, supporting legal arbitration and a diplomacy of peace, garnering Asian contributions on vital concerns for Europe and for the globe, intensifying relations with partners who share our values while engaging all others, are actions which will help make the 21st century a peaceful and progressive era.

Coordination matters

None of these goals will be reached, however, if Europeans fail to pool the means and tools of diplomacy and security. The creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS) has of course been a step in that direction. But a truly comprehensive diplomacy involves linking foreign, trade, aid, and security policies. This may be less necessary with fair weather partners, as most Asian democracies tend to be. But it certainly applies to other political regimes, whether they are externally assertive or reactively defensive.

It is surely no accident that there is a degree of coordination among member states and the EU in countries such as China, with its powerful and coordinated government, or in North Korea, where pooling information and sharing modest diplomatic resources is a recognised need. Elsewhere, member states may have less incentive to coordinate their diplomacy, and the EEAS may focus more on assistance or exchange programmes than on a strategy which includes economic and political goals. And in some cases, economic competition undermines efforts to construct a common diplomacy.

As for defence and hard security, European member states have become key providers of defence hardware and technology throughout Asia, while the European Union as such focuses more on preventive diplomacy and comprehensive security. The resulting contradiction between the hard power capacities that member states transfer to Asian partners and the soft power image projected by the EU does little to further Europe's image.

Instead, the EEAS and member states should try and work together on a number of issues. They have a common interest in supporting one another in, for example, clarifying the participation of Europeans in key regional fora or leveraging the limited naval presence of Europeans. They should also support shared stances on fundamental values such as human rights and encourage a common approach to trade and investment pacts. Doing so will translate into genuine international influence.