

Asia-Europe increase focus on security

By Shada Islam

Trade and business have long dominated Asia-Europe relations. Economic links are still vitally important in relations between the two regions. But Asian and European policymakers are also steadily stepping up their engagement on security issues.

The emphasis on Asia-Europe security ties is not new – but it is becoming stronger and more visible.

In both regions, there is a growing awareness that while the “Asian Century” has so far focused on strong economic growth and development, Asia also needs to tackle many difficult and potentially explosive historical enmities and complex crises.

Unease about the dangerous political and security fault lines that run across the region, has prompted many in Asia to take a closer look at Europe’s experience in ensuring peace, easing tensions and handling conflicts.

Europeans too are becoming more aware of the global implications of instability in Asia, not least in view of the unprecedented level of economic interdependence between the two regions.

This has meant strong European Union condemnation of North Korea’s missile and nuclear activities and calls for a negotiated settlement of conflicting national territorial claims in the East and South China Seas.

Stronger engagement on Asian security issues has meant a deeper EU dialogue with ASEAN – the Association of Southeast Asian Nations – which is in the forefront of pan-Asian peace-building efforts.

Last year, the European Union signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), ASEAN’s security blueprint for the region.

High-level European and Asian representatives have met in recent months in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Asia’s prime security forum, as well as the Shangri La Dialogue, an annual informal gathering of security experts held in Singapore, which EU HRVP Ashton attended this year for the first time.

Discussions on security issues are also an important part of political pillar in ASEM, the process of Asia–Europe meetings launched in 1996.

“Asia still has to deal with security issues that have been settled in Europe,” says *Viorel Isticioaia Budura*, *Managing Director for Asia and the Pacific at the European Union’s External Action Service (EEAS)*.

"We admire Asia's economic rise. But many Asian countries still face the challenges associated with nation and state-building. They are burdened by disputes and security flashpoints which need proper handling and solutions. If left unattended, these disputes could cause trouble for everyone," he says.

As Asian governments seek to build sustainable peace and stability in the region, Europe's experience in healing historical wounds and reconciliation can be helpful.

"We are interesting partners for Asia. We do not claim to be a "model". It's not a question of copying Europe, it's about learning from our past, including from our own mistakes, and seeking inspiration in what may be relevant."

Conventional military threats and conflicts are not the only question on Asia's new agenda.

Asian policymakers today are increasingly turning their attention to non-traditional security threats, an area where the EU has acquired special skills and expertise.

Europe has the know-how to work with Asia on questions like disaster-prevention and management, climate change, pandemics, terrorism and questions linked to food, water, energy and cyber security.

The EU's "comprehensive approach" to security calls for the deployment of a wide range of tools and instruments – short and long-term, humanitarian and development, security and political - to tackle new challenges.

"Europe's experience in community and institution-building and in constructing structures for regional security is an added asset for its partners," says *Isticioaia Budura*.

"We have learned how to engage in preventive diplomacy, confidence-building and establishing norms and rules to ensure regional peace and stability."

Peace in Europe was a long time coming. In contrast, "Asia is in a rush...so we must find a smart way to share all relevant experiences," he adds.

ASEM provides an ideal, and "unbelievably meaningful" format for Asia-Europe exchanges on all issues of mutual interest, including security challenges, says *Isticioaia Budura*.

"It allows us to better understand the complexity of developments in Asia... to take the pulse, take into account challenges and see how we can contribute."

"Regular ASEM meetings help Asia and Europe to improve their mutual understanding, identify common interests and cooperation, he says, adding: "It is good to have Asian and European leaders talking to each other."

"In a process of globalisation which keeps accelerating, ASEM has a very distinct relevance."

Since its launch, ASEM has worked to prevent the decoupling of regions and stopping Asia and Europe from turning inwards. This is still true. "We are moving together in the same direction," *Isticioaia Budura* underlines.

Despite the Eurozone crisis, Europe is continuing to engage with Asia. By voicing their confidence in Europe's economic future, Asian countries, for their part, have helped to stabilise the Euro.

ASEM's informality, large membership and flexibility mean that all countries have the freedom to bring up any issue that interests them. "Both regions can talk about their major concerns. They can choose what they see as relevant," says *Isticioaia Budura*.

Discussions focus on questions as diverse as disaster-prevention, non-proliferation, disarmament, human rights, energy and water management. In these and other areas, "there is a useful exchange of information and experience," he notes.

When they meet in October next year, ASEM leaders will focus on recovery, growth and jobs, *Isticioaia Budura* predicts.

The ASEM message is also likely to be that Europe can work with Asia to build sustained peace in the region and tackle non-traditional security challenges.

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