



Asia Pacific Bulletin

Grading Europe in the Asia-Pacific: European Foreign Policy Scorecard 2013

BY JONAS PARELLO-PLESNER

Europeans have long been accustomed to being at the center of the world, even in the post-WWII era alongside the United States. Ever since historic times when the city of Delphi in Greece was considered the navel of the earth, Europe has remained central to global affairs. Today, all eyes are focused on the Asia-Pacific, a region that for the past 70 years has been under the auspices of the US security umbrella. However, since the United States announced its intention in 2011 to increasingly “pivot” or “rebalance” its economic, political and military resources to the Asia-Pacific region, the question for Europeans is what are the implications of this policy for them?

Jonas Parello-Plesner, Senior Policy Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, explains that “On issues of trade and economics, the EU is clearly showing that it has a strategy that it is implementing.”

Each year, the European Council on Foreign Relations publishes a report on EU foreign policy, and this year’s report “European Foreign Policy Scorecard 2013” has just been released. The purpose of this report is to evaluate both the EU and its member state’s contributions, or lack of, to shared EU foreign policy effectiveness. Some of the findings regarding EU interactions with Asia and China in 2012 are worth highlighting.

Europeans have not yet decided on one coherent policy on how to respond to the US “pivot” to Asia. This may be understandable taking into consideration the effort that went into dealing with the Eurozone crisis last year. However, on paper at least, the newly created, and still evolving, European External Action Service (EEAS) did make some very positive steps towards Asia in 2012. EEAS High Representative Catherine Ashton continued her strategic dialogue with China and visited other parts of Asia in what she called her “Asian Semester,” which included her participation for the first time in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

It was at that forum that Ms. Ashton made a joint statement alongside her US counterpart, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, on cooperation in Asia. Topics covered included transnational crime, cyber-security, development, and “the importance of open markets in enhancing growth and development in the Asia-Pacific region, which also has a direct and positive impact on the economies of the European Union and the United States.” So far, that statement has not yet become the blueprint for a more strategic approach to Asia among EU member states or reverberated more widely in the Asia-Pacific region.

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

In June, the EU published new foreign policy guidelines on Asia, which included clearer language on maritime issues and speaking out in favor of international law and peaceful solutions to regional territorial disputes. The EU and member states have ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and thus hold credibility in



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that regard. But during ASEM, the EU–Asia summit equivalent to APEC, which was held in Laos in November, most EU member states seemed as malleable as ASEAN member states on addressing maritime disputes in the region after pressure from China to keep it off the agenda or to stay silent. Still, on other occasions and most notably in September last year when tensions flared between China and Japan on their maritime dispute, the EU through Ashton spoke out on the need for “peaceful and cooperative solutions in accordance with international law.”

The East Asia Summit (EAS) which is convened by ASEAN, passed without European participation last November, although last July Ashton signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC)—a non-aggression pact between ASEAN members and partners—which could allow the EU to participate in future EAS summits. Europe now needs to focus on how best to utilize its strategic participation in this forum. Clearly, it is an unstated prerequisite that for a seat at the table the EU will have to come with one credible interlocutor and one coherent policy.

It is on Burma that EU policy towards the Asia-Pacific has had the most visible impact. When Burmese leaders announced their intention to transition to a more democratic system of governance, the EU was quick to reciprocate by suspending sanctions and engage, including opening an office in Yangon in early 2012 and EU member states are fast becoming the major aid donor to Burma. In the words of Charles Grant, director of the Center for European Reform, “the EU has helped to change Burma for the better.” Moreover, Burma is no longer the dividing flash point between Europe clamoring for sanctions and ASEAN for quiet diplomacy. Instead, there is now the distinct possibility for increased joint EU-ASEAN cooperation concerning Burma, not to mention the greater impact of joint EU-US policy coordination with that emerging democracy.

Finally, it is in the realm of trade and investment where the EU really has a positive impact in the Asia-Pacific. Undeterred by the global financial crisis and the more regional Eurozone crisis, the EU has still managed to proactively engage in negotiations for a number of significant free trade agreements (FTA) throughout the region. An FTA deal with South Korea was concluded, and before the US-South Korea KORUS agreement. Negotiations for an EU–Singapore FTA are almost complete. Malaysia, India and Vietnam are next in line, and recently Japan has been added to the target list. It might be possible that the EU could conclude an agreement with Japan, before its ally, the United States. Even China has reached out to the EU to negotiate a bilateral investment treaty. Similarly, the United States is spinning a new web of economic engagement with its Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations with APEC partners, but not yet including China.

The lack of a substantial military presence in the Asia-Pacific grants the EU greater freedom of maneuver to pursue this type of trade strategy without criticism about containment from China. This is not the case for the United States, which China frequently accuses of a military and economic policy of containment, policies that China claims are evidenced by the US “pivot” and TTP negotiations. In reality, the EU’s Asia-Pacific free trade policy is all encompassing of Asia, demonstrating that China is not the only economic option in the region for the EU.

On issues of trade and economics, the EU is clearly showing that it has a strategy that it is implementing. On security issues, the track record is more uneven. Overall, the scorecard showed that the EU has a new reality to face in Asia. It does not have an automatic seat at the table and therefore must work all the harder to secure its own self-interests. 2013 may very well be the occasion to do so.

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