

Europe's potential in addressing maritime security in Asia: a Japanese view

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Rising interest, but persistent reluctance and scepticism

The level of interest in, and concerns about, Asia's maritime security situation have increased substantially in Europe in the past few years, reflecting growing tensions particularly in the South China Sea (SCS). China's actions there – island-building, reclamation and militarisation – are frequently making headlines in newspapers these days, including in Europe.

In Brussels and in other European capitals, intense debates on what stakes, if any, Europe has in the SCS and how it should respond to the changing situation are taking place. But at the same time, there are still many who remain unconvinced of the need for Europe, i.e. the European Union (EU) and individual European countries, to be more engaged, arguing that Europe has neither significant interests to defend, nor the capability to play any meaningful role there. Other European policy-makers hesitate because they do not want to be drawn into a potential conflict in Asia and jeopardise their economic interests, particularly by provoking Beijing, leading some to argue that Europe needs to maintain 'neutrality'.

Meanwhile, in Japan and other countries in the region, many people remain sceptical about Europe's potential role in Asian security. Low expectations in Asia, hesitancy and a sense of complacency in Europe are, in fact, mutually reinforcing. However, it is time to think more concretely about a European role in Asian security, because, first and foremost, Europe's strategic interests in Asia's security are higher than ever before, and also since Europe could play a positive role in the maintenance and promotion of a rule-based order in Asia. At the same time, Asians also need to realise the value of getting Europeans on board in addressing Asian security, particularly in the maritime field. For this purpose, three myths about Europe's role in Asian security need to be debunked.

Myth 1: Europe does not have any major strategic stakes in Asian security

Europe does have enormous interests to defend in Asia. What takes place in Asia's security scene affects Europe greatly. The world is becoming more interconnected. Firstly, given the increasing weight of Asia in Europe's global trade, sustaining Asia's economic success is of critical interest for Europe, which in turn is dependent on the maintenance of security and stability in the region. Secondly, what is put in danger are not just economic interests: it increasingly concerns the very principles of rule-based international order in which Europe believes.

Assertive behaviours and attempts to change the *status quo* by force or coercion in the SCS would endanger other regions in the world. French Defence Minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, argued at this year's Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore that: "If international maritime law cannot be respected in the China Seas, it could also be threatened in the Arctic and the Mediterranean Sea. For such risk of conflict to be contained, we must defend the law, and defend it ourselves".

Myth 2: Europe lacks military capability

To be sure, there are only a few countries in the EU which have the capability to deploy naval vessels to the SCS – mainly France and the UK – and their resources are limited. However, what they could achieve should not be underestimated.

Insisting that the disputes in the SCS should be addressed bilaterally, Beijing will certainly not welcome Europe's deeper engagement. While falling short of doing anything high-profile, the simple fact that European vessels sail the area regularly and visibly would send a strategic message that a broader international community is watching over the SCS, particularly China's actions there. For this purpose, the number or type of vessels coming from Europe are less significant and Europeans do not necessarily need to join US freedom of navigation operations.

This is exactly what Japan is doing as well – while remaining low-profile, engaging more by sending ships to the area and calling strategically important ports in Vietnam and the Philippines. Europe’s persistent engagement, something Beijing cannot fail to notice, is expected to raise the cost for those who attempt to change the *status quo* by force. Le Drian’s proposal to coordinate Europe’s presence in the SCS to make it more “regular and visible” seems particularly helpful in this regard.

Myth 3: Declarations and diplomacy do not work

It is always easy to dismiss the value of political declarations and other forms of diplomacy, not least in the face of China’s overt use of hard power. However, what needs to be remembered is that no one, including Washington, is prepared to push back Beijing’s attempts to change the *status quo* in the SCS by force. As long as this situation continues, other means and tools – particularly the power of international law and norms – may come into help.

Recent G7 Summits and Foreign Ministers’ meetings have stepped up their rhetoric in expressing concern about, and opposing, unilateral actions to change the *status quo* in Asia’s maritime security, both in the South and East China Seas since 2015, though not naming China. The fact that Beijing fiercely protested against the G7 countries in the wake of the G7 Foreign Ministers’ meeting in Hiroshima in April 2016, has shown that Beijing took it seriously. Now a ruling of the Arbitral Tribunal at the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in the Hague over a maritime dispute between China and the Philippines is about to be issued, and how the EU will respond to it will be a litmus test for the Union’s credibility as a champion of the rule of law in the international community. The fact that four out of five arbitrators of this case are Europeans is also something that needs to be remembered in thinking about Europe’s role and responsibility in defending and promoting the rule of law in the world.

High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, argued at last year’s Shangri-La Dialogue that: “We are not getting into the legitimacy of specific claims, but we are resolute as Europeans on *how* they should be resolved – that is, peacefully, without the use or threat of force”. How “resolute” the EU could remain is something that other countries, including those in the Asia-Pacific region, are watching closely. Neutrality in this context only means that Europe eschews from taking sides on territorial claims: it does not mean, though, keeping equal distance between Beijing’s position and the prospective arbitral ruling. The question to be asked is to what extent Europeans are prepared to risk their cordial (and mainly economic) relations with China by taking a principled hardline position regarding the legal procedures against Beijing.

It is time for Europe to fully realise its potential power and deploy its tools in addressing maritime security problems in Asia. By combining its principled defence of the rule of law and its capability to send vessels to the region, Europe should be able to make a difference; undeniably smaller than what the US could make, but nevertheless a valuable and necessary contribution to what it believes in, namely the maintenance and promotion of a rule-based international order. In terms of building a normative majority in the international community, Europe is still an indispensable player.

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