

From climate change to mediation: should the EU be a strategic actor in Asia-Pacific?

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The EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, is due to present a new Global Strategy later this month, though this may depend on the outcome of the UK's referendum on EU membership. [Olivia Gippner](#) writes on the EU's potential involvement in the Asia-Pacific region and what role, if any, this should play in its future strategy for engaging with the rest of the world.



Last week's Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore saw French and British representatives vowing to take a stronger security involvement in the region. French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, for example, suggested increasing naval patrols by European countries. However, it appears there was no notable strategic coordination by European ministers before the statement – making actual coordination mechanisms and European naval presence in the Asia-Pacific a [distant prospect](#).

The French (and British) advances at the Shangri-La Dialogue were typical of the way European foreign and security policy has developed over the past twenty years. Individual countries have frequently pushed their own agendas or blocked collective approaches. Just think of the memorable meeting at Saint-Malo between Chirac and Blair that is often considered the beginning of Europe's Common Security and Defense Policy.

But the European Union is at a different juncture in 2016. Over the next couple of weeks we will not only see the outcome of the British referendum on the EU, but also the launch of the EU's [Global Strategy](#) (though probably only if the UK decides to remain in the EU). Driven by High Representative Federica Mogherini, the Global Strategy is meant to provide an overall programme of priorities on foreign and security policy. While declaratory in nature, such a strategy could influence European budget decisions and the choice of expertise to build up within its institutions.

Strategy involves making tough choices regarding what to prioritise and what areas not to invest in. While there is a clear recognition within the EU of the importance of engaging with the Asia-Pacific region, more pressing crises have tended to push this long-term goal to the background. In this environment, a more consistent basic level of engagement should be institutionalised. This means, first and foremost, identifying EU interests, the added value it can bring to Asian partner countries, and what its competitive advantage is.

The EU's own interests in the region are broad and straightforward – the promotion of multilateralism, institution building, and stability. Contrast this with the thorny migration and security interests at play in the refugee crisis in the European neighbourhood and it is clear that the EU has more room for manoeuvre and a greater chance of success in Asia. This gives the EU an opportunity for achieving its goals by focusing on its partners' needs. But it is an opportunity that can only be taken with a fresh commitment to the region and an updated strategy that reflects the new reality of equal partnership.

Now one might argue, what is the benefit of going beyond the East Asia Policy Guidelines, the Central Asia Strategy, or the ASEAN paper? Indeed, an alternative approach would be to think of policy areas of common interest and base bilateral relations merely on 'functional cooperation' on common challenges. Good examples of this approach would be the EU's cyber security strategy or the Maritime Safety and Security Action Plan.

There are advantages to this approach, in particular on climate change, human security and development cooperation. Where many countries share the EU's interests, functional and multilateral cooperation will benefit all. Thus, a functional approach would provide the consistency needed in the EU's strategy towards the Asia-Pacific.

Moreover, the vast differences between the countries and actors in Asia-Pacific requires different priorities in bilateral relations. Lumping these together as a homogeneous 'Asia-Pacific' is highly problematic, due to different conditions and diverging interests. The relative importance of development issues as opposed to security cooperation will differ highly when developing relations with Australia or Nepal. A more issue-based approach promises to respond to individual countries' needs, by creating networks of partner countries with which the EU can develop, for instance, joint approaches to human-made disaster risk reduction.

A [new report](#) by LSE IDEAS and the Dahrendorf Forum thus argues that a new EU Asia strategy should be built around enhancing security and political relations, development cooperation, and climate change policy. To justify a regional perspective there are three main recommendations: to increase cooperation through Asian multilateral fora and non-traditional security issues, for the EU to position itself as a neutral arbiter in a volatile Asia Pacific, and to focus on public diplomacy. Cross-cutting concerns remain the diverging concepts of sovereignty and multilateralism between the two regions and a lack of mutual understanding.

As pointed out by former diplomat [Robert Cooper](#), a strategy cannot replace action – and cannot replace the role of able diplomats on the ground. He has [explored](#) how decades of EU involvement in Myanmar eventually bore fruit after the elections in

2010. The EU had successfully seized an opportunity when it appeared in discussions with Burmese counterparts to release political prisoners. Similarly, the decision to dispatch an ad-hoc EU electoral observation mission in 2012 was an important symbol supporting the democratisation process. Yet, his account is a cautionary tale that outside actors, even powerful ones like the EU, will only have an influence at the margins and when such “windows of opportunity” appear. Strategy and opportunity as well as diplomatic skill thus have to go hand-in-hand.

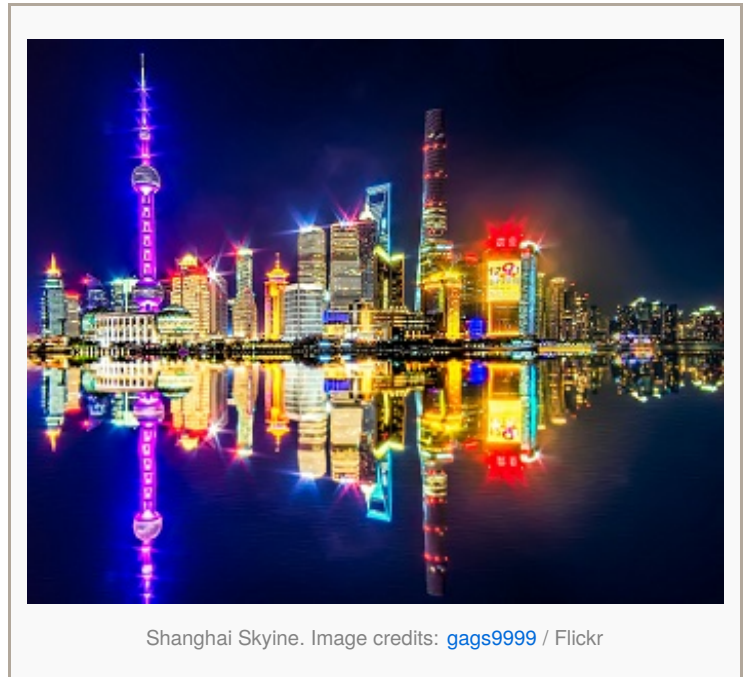
The EU and its member states are standing at a new juncture of global politics. There are internal challenges of competing member states' interests and parochialism of the different parts of its own bureaucratic structure. Yet, against this backdrop of power shifts, should it follow Chinese reformer Deng Xiaoping's advice and 'cross the river by feeling the stones'? Or should the EU rather develop a strong compass to navigate these 'changing waters'?

The full analysis was published as a Special Report '[Changing Waters: Towards a New EU Asia Strategy](#)' edited by Olivia Gippner. The research for this article was supported by the Dahrendorf Forum, a joint initiative by the Hertie School of Governance, LSE and Stiftung Mercator.

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