What Role Can Europe Play in Easing Conflict in Asia?

Eva Pejsova

The EU appears to be stepping up engagement on the South China Sea and other issues, and has a lot to offer, not least the normative values it has.

Alice Ekman

Beijing is trying to define the ideological division between China and the US, putting pressure on other countries to take sides.

Alessio Patalano

A move to return the country ‘east of Suez’ is worth considering: Britain could be a key player in a number of ways.

Ramon Pacheco Pardo

Europe’s stake in the Korean Peninsula may not be obvious. But in aid, trade, sanctions and nuclear expertise, it brings a lot to the table.
In Focus: Eva Pejsova

The European Union has long sought to play a greater role in Asia, but in areas such as territorial disputes in the South China Sea, the geopolitical rivalry between China and the US for dominance in the region, among other issues, has overshadowed the ambitions of Brussels. Also, ASEAN’s past skepticism of the EU as a possible player in the region has hampered those ambitions. But the EU appears to be stepping up its engagement on the South China Sea and other issues, and has a lot to offer, not least the normative values it represents, argues Eva Pejsova.

The EUropean Union has always paid great attention to developments in the South China Sea. The world’s largest trading bloc has a vital economic interest in safeguarding free, safe and stable shipping corridors, especially those connecting it to the economic powerhouses in East Asia. Northeast Asian countries constitute the EU’s most important export market and source of foreign direct investment (FDI), with China being its second-largest trading partner and EU trade with Japan alone accounting for 25 percent of global gross domestic product. The EU is also ASEAN’s second-largest trading partner, while ASEAN is the EU’s third-largest partner.

In addition to economic interests, Brussels also has legal and political commitments to regional stability, stemming from its Strategic Partnerships, membership in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and accession to the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation (TAC). Finally and most importantly, are the disputes in the South China Sea: China’s unilateralism and the threat it represents to the rules-based global order has been keeping Europe, positioning itself as a normative superpower, on its toes.

While there are many reasons for the EU’s interest in the South China Sea, its policies and actions are less well known, or indeed in some cases even visible. Given its many structural and operational constraints, Brussels has been often accused of free-riding on the US military presence in the region with its contribution limited to supportive statements with little follow up or effective value. That said, a number of internal and external developments in recent years have...
transformed the EU’s foreign policy, making it more proactive and realistic. Brussels has also become more alert to China’s disruptive potential — in the region and globally.

As the EU aspires to play a greater security role in Asia and earn observer status at the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting-Plus and the East Asia Summit, its approach to the South China Sea — the region’s most burning security hotspot — serves as a useful case study. Balancing its principled commitment to international norms and its pragmatic need to continue engaging China economically, Europe’s involvement takes the form of diversified actions at several levels.

Although their naval activities are conducted in their national capacities, in the defense of freedom of navigation some of its member states serve the EU’s principled interests and benefit from its tacit support. At a lower spectrum, the EU has increased dialogue and capacity-building exercises with ASEAN and individual Southeast Asian countries on functional, non-traditional maritime security issues, which improve the region’s maritime security environment in the long term. Finally, Europe continues to be a global normative heavyweight, which may be, given the currently fragile rules-based order, one of its greatest assets.

**FROM POSITION TO POLICY**

As with most international actors with no territorial claims in the South China Sea, the EU does not take any sides in the disputes and maintains a position of “principled neutrality” with regard to sovereignty issues. A contracting party to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Brussels has always insisted on the importance of international law, promoted cooperative initiatives and urged parties to abide by international norms and principles for the peaceful resolution of the disputes.

This position is reflected in official statements and documents by the EU that are related to Asia or to maritime security in general. Already in 2012, the East Asia Policy Guidelines were encouraging peaceful and co-operative solutions, urging China and ASEAN to agree on a legally binding code of conduct. The 2014 EU Maritime Security Strategy builds on the respect for international law, full compliance with UNCLOS and freedom of navigation as the basis of a stable global environment.

Finally, the current EU Global Strategy (EUGS), published in June 2016, specifically vows to “uphold freedom of navigation, stand firm on the respect for international law, including the Law of the Sea and its arbitration procedures, and encourage the peaceful settlement of maritime disputes.” It also stresses the need to “build maritime capacities and support an ASEAN-led regional security architecture.”

But how much are these principles reflected in EU foreign policy? The failure to maintain a united front in support of the verdict of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) on the Philippines vs. China case in July 2016 — only a few weeks after the release of the EU Global Strategy — was a disappointment. Brussels’ final official statement was weakened by differences among member states wary of jeopardizing their relationship with Beijing, despite a series of declarations voicing strong support for UNCLOS and international law by the EU High Representative, Vice President Federica Mogherini (either individually or within the context of the G-7) in the run-up to the verdict.

Although this partly undermined the EU’s credibility, it was also a useful wakeup call, triggering a much-needed public debate across the continent. China’s influence and activities through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have driven a wedge into European unity and political coherence, in a way bringing to Europe a taste of some of the side-effects of the South China Sea conflict. As a consequence, it helped to pave the way for a more cautious and proactive foreign policy towards Asia.

Bilateral relations with Beijing and the interests of individual member states continue to weigh on EU decision making. The question of European arms sales to Southeast Asian countries and dual-use technology transfers to China, arguably contributing to a defense build-up in the South China Sea, also add to the ambiguity of Brussels’ foreign policy towards the region.

Nonetheless, efforts to step up the EU’s security profile continue. What some have called “realpolitik with European characteristics,” the concept of “principled pragmatism,” articulated in the EU Global Strategy, lowers ambitions to promote certain values, such as democratization. It also acknowledges the importance of hard power and urges greater strategic autonomy for the EU. In the context of the South China Sea, it basically means continuing to engage China on convergent interests, while maintaining its normative discourse and tactfully supporting military actions by its member states.

**FREEDOM OF NAVIGATION**

Despite increased integration in security and defense matters since 2016, the EU is still far from achieving its historical dream of a “European army.” With the exception of ad hoc Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) missions (currently in the Mediterranean and off the coast of Somalia), the EU does not operate any permanent naval assets.

Aware of its operational limitations, the EU Maritime Security Strategy explicitly encourages member states “to play a strategic role in providing global reach, flexibility and access” for the EU, and to use their armed forces to “support the freedom of navigation and contribute to global governance by deterring, preventing and countering illicit activities.” Two of the three member states that possess blue-water naval capabilities are currently actively engaged in defense of freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea.

France, with overseas territories across the Indo-Pacific, around 9 million square kilometers of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) and a permanent military presence in New Caledonia and French Polynesia, considers itself a fully-fledged regional maritime security player. Regularly transiting through regional waters, Paris has stood up more vocally for the defense of freedom of navigation since 2016, after the defense minister at the time, Jean-Yves Le Drian, made a landmark speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, pointing out the dangerous impact of Chinese behavior in the South China Sea and beyond, including in the Arctic and the Mediterranean.

Le Drian openly called for a more proactive European role in the region, encouraging navies “to co-ordinate efforts to ensure a regular and visible presence in Asia’s maritime domain.” In a symbolic gesture, the subsequent Jeanne d’Arc mission, conducted in April 2017, accommodated 52 British Royal Navy personnel, 12 officers of various European nationalities and an EU official — the chair of the European Committee for Asia and the Pacific — for a crossing of the South China Sea.

In 2018, current French Defense Minister Florence Parly pledged to continue the exercises, joining forces with the UK, which shares the same “vision, values and a willingness to achieve them.” Both countries also have close defense partnerships with India, Japan, Australia and the US. Despite the UK’s looming withdrawal from the EU, its security interests remain closely tied to Europe. It is also bound to defense
co-operation with France by the 2010 Lancaster House agreements.

The UK, also home to regional waters and part of the Five Power Defense Arrangement, joined the foreign presence in the South China Sea more recently, with the deployment of three ships in August 2018 to send “the strongest of signals” on the importance of freedom of navigation. The preservation of the rules-based international order is vital to the survival of Britain in a post-Brexit world. Promoting its “Global Britain” strategy, it also needs to strengthen defense co-operation with Indo-Pacific partners to reassure them of its lasting commitment to regional security and shared values.

While the motivations and the form of the French and the British freedom of navigation activities vary slightly, they send the same message, which serves the interests of all EU member states. In light of heightened tensions since the beginning of 2019, like-minded countries are starting to form a united front in defense of freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and the universal application of international law. Although Brussels and Washington may diverge in their current positions on and treatment of China, they both share an interest in preserving a free, rules-based global maritime domain.

MARITIME CAPACITY-BUILDING

Although warships make the headlines and naval exercises are of symbolic importance, freedom of navigation is not the only problem in the South China Sea. Diplomatic standoffs due to unresolved sovereignty disputes, overfishing, Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, depletion of the marine natural habitat and the overall lack of governance are just some of the challenges that cannot be resolved through military means.

If Europe is to effectively contribute to regional stability, it must make the best use of its extensive experience in crisis prevention, peaceful settlement of disputes, joint development of resources, expertise in international law and good ocean governance. Capacity building and best-practice sharing in all of the above is precisely what it does: both at the multilateral level, with ASEAN and within the ARF, as well as with individual Southeast Asian countries.

A strong supporter of regional integration, ASEAN remains the EU’s prime interlocutor. Maritime security stands as a key priority for enhanced political and security co-operation in the ASEAN-EU Plan of Action 2018-2022, emphasizing the importance of the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and peaceful resolution of disputes, among other issues. Since 2013, the EU has held five rounds of the EU-ASEAN High-Level Dialogue on Maritime Security Cooperation, addressing various functional security issues including port security, maritime law enforcement, marine resource management and conflict prevention.

Maritime security, preventive diplomacy and mediation were the focus of the EU-ASEAN Seminar on Security and Defense organized annually by the European Security and Defence College since 2014. Finally, the Enhanced Regional EU-ASEAN Dialogue Instrument is another platform dedicated to advancing the political-security integration of ASEAN, looking more specifically at fisheries policy, IUU fishing and the marine natural environment.

In its current capacity as co-chair of the ARF Inter-sessional Meeting on Maritime Security (together with Vietnam and Australia), the EU has been organizing a series of Workshops on Maritime Law Enforcement, promoting best-practice sharing and concrete measures to reduce regional tensions, enhancing Maritime Domain Awareness, land-sea and civil-military nexuses, and opposing IUU fishing. Many similar initiatives are also being undertaken with individual claimant countries, especially Vietnam.

Finally, Europe’s normative values should not be underestimated. If the defense of a global rules-based order is an obvious strategic interest, the EU’s involvement in promoting international ocean governance is less well known. In 2016, the EU took a global leadership role in the implementation of the 2030 UN Sustainable Development Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goal 14 (the “Ocean chapter”). Although a matter of low politics, collaborative, ecosystem-based management of marine resources, joint research and data collection, as well as co-operation for the protection of the sea’s rich marine environment, are not only vital for the preservation of the South China Sea, they can also help ease regional tensions.

A WORTHY PARTNER?

The EU’s quest for recognition as a political and security actor in Asia is not new. The response to its desire for a seat at the East Asia Summit and more recently observer status at the ADMM-Plus Expert Working Groups will depend on Europe effectively adding value to regional security.

For a long time, ASEAN’s opposition to EU membership has been an expression of doubt about its coherence, given the EU’s unfortunate record of over-promising and under-delivering. Moreover, given the fact that ASEAN is currently highly sought after by countries such as Japan, the US, India and Australia, it simply does not consider Europe, still a marginal global security actor, as a critical player.

But the regional security environment has become more diverse and more complex. While geopolitical tensions remain the most visible feature of Southeast Asia’s strategic landscape, emerging non-traditional maritime security issues increasingly preoccupy the ASEAN leadership, and efforts to set sovereignty issues aside and focus on conflict prevention, functional co-operation and dialogue in the South China Sea have been gaining ground.

Europe’s attitude towards ASEAN and its member states has also changed. Once positioning itself as a “natural partner,” Brussels has realized that if it wants to be taken seriously, it cannot be through self-entitlement and empty political gestures, but rather concrete, practical actions that demonstrate its ability to bring about positive change.

Despite a growing security debate in Brussels, the EU is still not a traditional security player nor a strategic game changer in the Indo-Pacific region. However, its creative thinking on non-traditional issues, such as its comprehensive approach to crisis management (seen in its counter-piracy mission, known as Atalanta), functional expertise on good order at sea, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and joint development of resources and fisheries management can be a valuable and lasting contribution to regional maritime security — in the South China Sea and beyond.

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