Europe’s Role in Asian Security: A Challenge, Not a Choice

Jo Inge Bekkevold
Europe finds itself increasingly pulled into a debate about how best to re-engage Asian security issues without jeopardizing relations with Beijing.

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Amid the contest for influence in East Asia, EU policy-makers are paying too little attention to the need for new strategic thinking.

Ian Bowers
As Beijing’s will to be a leading seapower dramatically shifts Asia’s geopolitical environment, Europe is ill-prepared to rise to the occasion.
Can the Burden be Shared? Europe, the Sea and the Liberal Order in Asia

By Ian Bowers

As the world’s largest trading bloc, the European Union has a huge stake in maritime security, freedom of navigation and other issues pertaining to the world’s great waterways, particularly in Asia.

Therein lies one of the greatest challenges posed by the rise of China. Beijing’s determination to become a leading seapower is dramatically changing the geopolitical environment in the region, and Europe is ill-prepared to rise to the occasion. Ian Bowers explores the issues and how policy-makers in Europe should respond.

IT IS UNDENIABLE that Asia is now the hub around which the world’s geopolitical future will be determined. Where once continental Europe dominated global affairs, now the seas of East and Southeast Asia have become the crucible of geostrategic great power competition. That this competition is manifesting itself at sea presents a set of challenges that the international community is seemingly ill-equipped to deal with. At the heart of the problem is China’s re-emergence as a great power and its concurrent pursuit of seapower. This is not only altering the regional balance of power established after the end of the Cold War, it is also undermining the normative foundations of the global international maritime system.

The failure of the international community to alleviate the pressure that China is putting on the Asian maritime system has led to calls for Europe to take a greater role in the region to share the burden of protecting the international order. However, at a time when policy and strategic coherence is required, Europe is far from being a coherent strategic actor. Further, its naval forces are in something of a parlous state, while the threat from Russia in the North Atlantic and instability in the Mediterranean are ever-present concerns. Nevertheless, Europe has significant interests in Asia and is demonstrating signs of increasing security engagement.

In this essay, I ask how Europe should respond to a challenge that is thousands of kilometers away but involves close allies and could undermine the foundations of global economic and political stability.

CHINA AND THE SEA

In economic, political and strategic terms, China now presents a competing vision to the US-led international order. At sea, China’s development and co-ordinated use of the military, para-military and civil components of seapower is allowing Beijing to establish primacy in maritime East Asia and become increasingly influential in the waters of South Asia and beyond.

China’s navy, the People’s Liberation Army Navy, is now the second most powerful naval force in Asia after the United States. Through the development of shore-based missiles, increasingly advanced aviation and subsurface assets and a numerically superior surface fleet, China is pursuing the capacity to deny US and allied naval forces the ability to freely operate in East Asian waters in a time of war. If successful, this approach will substantially inhibit the ability of the US to project influence in the region and undermine the deterrent effect of US military power.

Vitaliy, China is also developing the world’s largest maritime law-enforcement force, which is increasingly militarized and is at the forefront of expansive and illegitimate claims to maritime territorial and economic rights in the East and South China Seas. The construction and militarization of artificial islands in the Paracel and Spratly Island chains facilitates these activities by allowing Beijing to maintain a permanent and increasingly powerful presence in the South China Sea. The combined power of the PLA Navy and the Chinese Coast Guard now allows China to apply substantial coercive pressure to undermine the rights of the littoral states of the region and prevent them from undertaking legitimate commercial activities at sea, such as fishing and oil exploration. Further, Beijing is attempting to use its controversial and largely unrecognized interpretation of international maritime law to validate and normalize this approach.

What can be loosely described as a “China First” policy at sea is strategically and economically advantageous to Beijing and is an antithesis to the liberal values by which the maritime space has been regulated since the advent of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Consequently, a gauntlet has been thrown down to the US, littoral states in the region and defenders of the liberal international order to accept the Chinese approach or develop effective strategies to combat it. While the US, Japan and other smaller states have so far largely rejected the former option, they are struggling to achieve the latter.

There is an apparent unwillingness on the part of the US to accept the high cost of directly challenging China over what are vital but essentially long-term and non-existential matters. Further, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations has struggled to present a coherent response, and the problems of power asymmetry and a relative lack of deployable regional military and civil maritime capabilities have hindered the operationalization of an effective counter-strategy by the littoral states of the region.

Even initiatives such as the Quad, which aims to link the democratic nations of the US, India, Japan and Australia into a loose coalition of democratic states to counter China, are problematic due to the lack of concrete, long-term strategic or operational approaches.

WHAT EUROPE IS DOING

Given the economic importance of maritime East Asia, Europe has a vested interest in ensuring the open and secure use of both the South and East China Seas. In 2017, Asia was the main destination for European exports while China alone was the largest source of imports. Even if limited conflict occurs at sea between China and the US or another actor, Europe will not be immune from the economic and political aftershocks.
The stable, free and secure use of the sea is therefore of paramount importance to all European countries yet delivering a coherent operational response to contemporary events in the region is proving difficult. Both the European Union and NATO have released statements that have indirectly criticized China and called for an adherence to international law and the peaceful, legal resolution of disputes in the region. NATO has pursued limited co-operation with regional partners including Australia, Japan and South Korea, but this has little or no real-world strategic impact. In 2017, the EU raised the possibility of co-ordinated European freedom of navigation exercises in the South China Sea. However, the reality is that in capitals across Europe, there is little appetite for a coherent and sustained operational approach to East Asia.

Two notable exceptions are the United Kingdom and France, which in the past 12 months have stepped up operations in the region. The French Navy maintains bases on Réunion Island in the Indian Ocean and on New Caledonia in the Pacific Ocean. It performed a highly publicized transit through the South China Sea in 2018 and exercised with the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force in 2017 and 2018. Also in 2018, the British Ministry of Defence announced that three Royal Navy warships would conduct operations in the Asia-Pacific this year. This will be the first time in five years that the UK would have a sustained naval presence in the region. These British deployments have multiple objectives, including monitoring the effectiveness of UN sanctions against North Korea and participating in exercises with Japan and other regional partners including those in the Five Power Defense Arrangements. In April 2018, a small flotilla of British and French naval vessels performed joint exercises in the Java Sea, signaling that Europe’s two largest navies continue to have a global presence.

MINIMAL IMPACT
Proponents of this greater European involvement in maritime East Asia legitimately argue that Europe needs to actively support the international order and share the burden with the US and other Asian countries of maintaining the post-Cold War status quo. The UK and France’s increasing naval activities would seemingly indicate that they are taking up this challenge, however, the ultimate strategic impact remains unclear.

The deployment of the Royal Navy or the French Navy in the waters of East Asia is an undeniably attractive option for policy-makers and naval leaders alike. It allows the leaders of the two Western European UN Security Council members to demonstrate that they retain a global role in terms of international security. It also demonstrates to Washington that Europe is not free-riding on the back of the security provided by the US Navy and could signal to China that democratic nations will not tolerate Beijing’s coercive and aggressive approach to the maritime arena.

However, despite these advantages, the reality is that a small or transitory European presence has little strategic effect in terms of combating China’s actions in the region. Currently, European operations have closely followed the US model of port visits, freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, naval exercises and
other common tools of naval signaling and coercion. Yet, there has been a noticeable lack of coercive effect on Chinese behavior.

Although the US and others have conducted freedom of navigation exercises, thereby contesting China’s egregious maritime claims, Beijing refuses to change its approach. In 2018, a US aircraft carrier visited Vietnam for the first time since the end of the Vietnam War. This is just one example of US naval diplomacy and was designed to signal increasingly close ties between Hanoi and Washington. However, days later, Vietnam, for the second time, acceded to Chinese pressure and halted an oil exploration project in the contested waters of the South China Sea. Similarly, despite US operations in the region and public statements against the construction and militarization of artificial islands, China has continued with both.

If the full might of Washington and the US Navy is unable to affect any change in Chinese behavior in peacetime, will the periodic presence of small numbers of European ships with relatively little combat capability make any significant difference? Advocates argue that the presence of multiple international actors seeking to enforce international norms can have a greater cumulative effect. However, collective-actor solutions require a credible threat of the use of force and a unity of purpose that is difficult to achieve among disparate states. This problem is magnified when the stakes are high and the threat is non-existent, as it is when dealing with China in the East and South China Seas.

That there is little strategic effect also undermines the argument that by deploying capabilities to East Asia, Europe is sharing the burden with the US of maintaining the international order. There is currently a fractious debate between the US and Europe over burden sharing and the unwillingness of the major European powers in NATO to meet their commitment to spend 2 percent of their GDP on defense.

Instead of deploying small numbers of vessels to East Asia, NATO’s navies will have much greater global strategic influence by initially concentrating their limited resources in the waters of Europe. Sustained and combined operations in the seas of both Northern and Southern Europe would not only signal to the US that Europe is willing to meet its obligations in its own waters, but also provide an effective defense of the liberal order in this region.

The threat from Russia has once again become a core security issue, particularly in northern waters and in the Baltic. Meanwhile, in the Mediterranean, the continued challenge of refugees using the sea to cross into Europe is a drain on naval resources at a time when Russia is projecting power in the vital southern seas.

Importantly, Europe is suffering from a dearth of naval capability. Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a significant reduction in European naval power as budgetary constraints and failed modernization programs have resulted in smaller ship numbers and a notable lack of readiness. For example, for a period in 2017, all six German navy submarines were non-operational due to maintenance issues. Similar to the British Royal Navy currently operates only 19 major surface combatants, which includes six modern Type 45 destroyers, all of which will need to undergo extensive refits to repair inherent flaws in their propulsion and power systems. Even deploying two or three ships to Asia means that a substantial proportion of the UK’s operational fleet is unavailable for European operations.

Taking Europe’s future aircraft carrier capabilities as an example, currently, France possesses one such vessel, the *Charles De Gaulle*, while the UK has two Elizabeth-class vessels coming online in the near future. One aircraft carrier is not sufficient to provide a continuous at sea presence, as demonstrated by the current European carrier gap caused by the *Charles De Gaulle* undergoing a prolonged refit. Three vessels would allow Europe to maintain an aircraft carrier at sea at all times, which would provide Europe with a powerful and sustainable power projection capability that could be used to enhance deterrence in the waters of Northern Europe or to backstop US operations in the Middle East. This force can be enhanced by the smaller but still capable Italian and Spanish naval aviation capabilities. Essentially, one European aircraft carrier may have little strategic impact in Asia but a large strategic impact in Europe.

**GOING FORWARD**

This argument that Europe would create greater strategic effect by keeping its naval forces closer to home does not mean that Europe should ignore events in maritime East Asia. European states and organizations have repeatedly said that they believe in the maintenance of the international order at sea. However, symbolic gestures such as the periodic deployment of naval vessels to Asia do not have a strategic impact and could even undermine European security at home.

If Europe is serious about protecting the existing international maritime order, it should both develop a coherent strategy to do so and be aware of the potential risks. After all, China is a major international actor with substantial strategic and economic interests at sea. Over the short term, Europe — in co-ordination with other parties — should pursue a political, legal and economic strategy to put diplomatic and economic pressure on China to alter its approach to maritime Asia. European countries should also commit to greater capacity building efforts with littoral states in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean. This should focus on greater training, the provision of equipment and the diplomatic, economic and organizational support for better co-ordinated inter-regional responses to Chinese actions.

Over the longer term, once Europe creates a sustained and unified approach to operations at sea in home waters, a coherent and sustainable approach to operations in East Asia could be established with the consistent and routine deployment of naval vessels from multiple European countries to Asian waters. China’s maritime strategy, particularly in East Asia, is a challenge to all nations that support the international maritime order. But effective, rather than symbolic, solutions from European and other global actors are required if they are serious about altering China’s approach.

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