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.

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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.
How Will Europe Handle Conceptual Divergence Between China and the US?

By Alice Ekman

The growing geopolitical rivalry between Washington and Beijing is playing out across well-known flashpoints such as Taiwan, the South China Sea and the Korean Peninsula. But officials from both sides are putting pressure on other countries to take sides and embrace diverging foreign policy and security concepts and architectures. Alice Ekman explains the growing dilemma this is creating, as illustrated by remarks made at this year’s Shangri-La Dialogue.

THIS YEAR’S annual Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore was particularly interesting because a large delegation from China participated — and at a significantly higher level than at last year’s event. Listening to the lengthy American and Chinese speeches from a comparative perspective confirmed what has been in the air since Chinese President Xi Jinping came to power in 2013: the ideological gap between the US and China is widening.

This is noticeable at both the domestic and foreign-policy levels. On the domestic front, the Communist Party of China (CPC) appears increasingly pleased with its own political system. In Singapore for the May 31-June 2 dialogue, General Wei Fenghe, China’s Minister of National Defense, reminded the audience that China has “a socialist system,” that “the [People’s Liberation Army] is the people’s force under the leadership of the CPC,” and referred to the “strong leadership of the CPC Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core.” If this rhetoric is common in speeches directed at a domestic audience, it is rather new in an international forum. Not only does China appear very confident about underlining the specific features of its system, it also appears more willing to position this system as a reference point for the rest of the world. In July 2017, State Councilor Yang Jiechi wrote of China: “We should enhance confidence in the path, theories, system and culture of socialism with distinctive Chinese features, and share our governance experience with other countries.”

That sentiment was expressed in almost the same words several months later by Xi during the 19th Party Congress in October 2017.

Many observers in the US, but also in Europe, tend not to take the ideological gap seriously, believing that the “red” references present in speeches by top Chinese officials are there merely for political purposes, that those references do not indicate a strong belief. But speeches like the ones heard in Singapore this year, as well as more informal exchanges with officials and think tankers in Beijing, tend to indicate the contrary: many Chinese policymakers do not look at the socialist identity of their country with cynicism. This seems to be particularly true at senior levels within the People’s Liberation Army and the Communist Party, where political and ideological loyalty are key criteria for recruitment and promotion.

At foreign-policy level, China’s conceptual and ideological framework also differs greatly from that of the US. At the Shangri-La Dialogue, Major General Ci Guowei, Chief of the Office for International Military Co-operation at the Central Military Commission, reiterated that China opposes the concept of alliances and proposes instead a “new model of defense co-operation” based on partnerships. To be sure, since the People’s Republic of China was created
in 1949, the country’s diplomacy has never embraced alliances. But under Xi’s leadership, the rejection of alliances is clearer than under his predecessor Hu Jintao, and appears more frequently in official communications. It is worth noting that China not only opposes the US alliance system, which it considers illegitimate (particularly in its neighborhood) but also any alliance system in general.

Defense Minister Wei’s speech had a broader “non-aligned” frame that reminded one of China’s foreign policy under Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, at events such as the 1955 Asia-Africa Conference in Bandung. Xi commemorated that landmark gathering of what became the non-aligned movement at the 60th anniversary of the conference three years ago during a visit to Indonesia, declaring his commitment to “carrying forward the Bandung spirit” and promoting co-operation among Asian and African developing nations. In his speech in Singapore, Wei positioned China as a “developing country” that never engaged in “colonial exploitation” and that advocates that “all countries, big or small, strong or weak, rich or poor, are equal members of the international community.”

Sino-US Ideological Divide

The current differences between China and the US are particularly stark as they discuss their concepts and expressions of foreign policy: ‘alliances’ versus “partnerships”; “Indo-Pacific” versus “Asia-Pacific”; a “rules-based international order” versus “a Community of Common Destiny”; and so on. The general impression that came out of the Shangri-La Dialogue is that top representatives from the US and China are speaking from vastly different standpoints, whether on a conceptual or practical level. They touched on similar issues — Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula and the South China Sea — but from such opposite perspectives that no common language seemed to exist, no dialogue possible. Not only was the content of the American speeches extremely different, but also the communication style, the working methodology and the way each delegation interacted with other participants. Of course, the two countries’ political systems and rhetorical frameworks have been very different since 1949 but the gap has grown since Xi came to power and reinforced the centrality of the CPC.

The 2019 Shangri-La Dialogue was a reminder that the current competition between China and the US is not merely commercial. It is also geopolitical (diverging on Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula and the South China Sea), institutional (competing security institutions and forums), as well as conceptual.

Acknowledging the conceptual divergences of such an ideological gap between China and the US is important, because it is the basis on which competing regional and global institutional initiatives are currently developing. If China has become more active in restructuring its economic governance, it is also increasingly investing in security governance. China’s opposition to alliance systems that was expressed at the Shangri-La Dialogue is not new; it is in line with previous speeches made from 2013 onward. Since then, China has clearly called for the creation of a new security architecture in Asia. The May 2015 White Paper on China’s military strategy explicitly advocates promoting “the establishment of a regional framework for security and co-operation.” This call was reaffirmed in October 2016 and detailed further in a White Paper published in January 2017 on security co-operation in the Asia-Pacific. Chinese officials have repeatedly declared, in one way or another that the region needs to be restructured. On Feb. 16, 2019, at the 55th Munich Security Conference, Politburo member Yang Jiechi declared that “China supports efforts to explore a regional security vision and architecture that fits the reality of this region.”

Undoubtedly, China is unhappy with the current security governance architecture and has the political determination under Xi to restructure it in a post-alliance direction. It aims to do so step-by-step in the coming decades with the help, first and foremost, of countries that are not part of the US-led alliance system — such as Russia. But it can also call on security allies and partners of the US, which are most welcome to join China’s informal “circle of friends,” according to the official expression developed under Xi.

Europe Pulled Two Ways

A blurred polarization of security ties may develop as a result, and that generates a new set of choices and dilemmas for the European Union and its member states. These choices are conceptual as well as practical. At a conceptual level, China has encouraged many EU member states to include the expression “Community of Common Destiny” (or of a “shared future,” depending on the text) in joint statements and documents proposed by China, such as the Memorandum of Understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative. On the other side, the EU and its member states have been encouraged by several of its security partners to embrace the concept of the Indo-Pacific. Some European countries have embraced it, such as France, others have not. This diversity of conceptual approaches within Europe does not represent an issue per se, especially when it relates to different public diplomacy choices. But the EU and its member states will increasingly face a deeper conceptual question related to the alliance. How do they envisage the future of the alliance system? This question is becoming more immediate at a time of reinforced China-US tensions, when one country is calling into question the security architecture that the other has promoted. According to China’s official communications, every country is welcome into the new type of security partnership that it is currently developing, including US allies — from Europe or elsewhere. On the other side, the US has shown discontent when some of its allies — including from Europe — have joined some of China’s initiatives, from the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to the Belt and Road Initiative. More recently, the US has warned some of its allies of the security risks of developing Huawei 5G networks on their national territory, and may issue similar warnings regarding other types of technologies in the future.

In this context, conceptual and pragmatic choices are increasingly intertwined: European countries — as well as any other country apart from the US or China — may be categorized as either China’s partner (or part of China’s “circle of friends!”) or an ally of the US, depending on which technology they decide to embrace, which multilateral forums they attend (attendance or not, for example at China’s annual Belt and Road Forum or the Xiangshan Forum) or which expressions they use in their foreign policy communications (use of the term “Indo-Pacific,” for instance).

Ad-hoc pragmatic choices may, in a step-by-step and indirect manner, channel the positioning of many countries in the coming years, as China-US rivalry is likely to last. In this context, a proactive reasoning about diverging foreign policy and security concepts, and the future of the alliance system, appears more timely than ever.

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