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.

Øystein Tunsjø
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.
The East Asia-Europe Security Nexus
By Øystein Tunsjø

The growing rivalry between China and the United States, centered on the contest for influence in East Asia, has important implications for the security policy of the European Union as it faces a more assertive Russia and other challenges. In the future, the US is likely to devote more attention and resources to Asia, and even to call on its European allies in the event of conflict in the Asia-Pacific. And yet, not enough attention is being paid by EU policy-makers to the need for new strategic thinking, writes Øystein Tunsjø.

For more than 500 years, global power was centered in Europe and the West. For centuries, European nations have been among the most powerful in the international system. But this is changing. As I argue in my latest book, the world is entering a new bipolar system concentrated on East Asia, with the United States and China as the two superpowers. However, the EU’s Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy has neglected these important developments. It is not difficult to see why. The strategy focuses on the pressing issues of today, including an assertive Russia, terrorism, migration and the refugee crisis, Brexit, populism, economic crises, climate change, cyber security and energy security. Preoccupation with these challenges has led the EU and European states to overlook how global power shifts affect Europe. Similarly, NATO’s strategic thinking on changes in the global balance of power and its implications for Europe remains underdeveloped. By focusing on a comparative analysis of the US and its two flanking regions, I seek in this article to examine how security challenges in East Asia mirror those facing the US and its allies in Europe. It focuses on the allies’ response to the anti-access/area-denial capabilities developed by China and Russia, their co-operation on missile defense, the deterrence/reassurance predicaments inherent to their alliances and the risks that a potential conflict in East Asia pose to Europe.

China: the only peer competitor
The contemporary rise of China suggests that the balance of power in the US’s two flanking regions is only challenged in East Asia. China’s nominal gross domestic product (GDP) and defense spending is roughly equal to the combined GDP and defense spending of all the East Asian states, including Russia and India. By way of contrast, the US’s allies can maintain a balance of power in Europe. Russia’s GDP is barely larger than Spain’s, and if Germany had spent 2 percent of its GDP on defense, which is the stated aim of NATO countries and a relatively limited level of defense spending for any major power, then Germany alone would have had higher defense spending than Russia. Because China is more powerful than all other states combined within its region, the US is likely to become more preoccupied with East Asia and increasingly shift more of its resources and capabilities toward this region.

This geopolitical shift is likely to affect NATO’s ambitions for collective defense in Europe and shape its new maritime strategy. The US-China rivalry will primarily be in the maritime domain. In 2016, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Navy commissioned 18 ships with a total displacement of 150,000 tons, roughly half of the overall displacement of the British Royal Navy. Balancing China’s regional ambitions in maritime East Asia requires a strong forward US air and naval presence. The primary challenge from Russia is on the ground in Europe. While its naval capabilities pose a potential threat, this remains secondary to the continental theater. Thus, the US army might sustain a light footprint in Europe while US naval and air forces are likely to be concentrated in the Asia-Pacific. Naval and air assets can move between regions, but ships and airplanes can only be in one place at one time. The US is unlikely to abandon Europe or NATO, but global power dynamics suggest that a forward presence to counter future Russian activities in the North Atlantic and the High North is likely to be, at best, a secondary priority for the US Navy.

Since contemporary Russia is not the mighty Soviet Union that once threatened Western Europe and maritime lines of communications in the Atlantic, the northern region is less strategically vital to the US and NATO today. But since China has emerged as the only peer competitor to the US, and the US is shifting its naval capabilities toward the Asia-Pacific, a revitalized Russian Northern Fleet has an opportunity to assert its interests in the High North and the North Atlantic. With sea control in the Barents Sea and anti-access/area denial capabilities in the North Atlantic, current technological developments — especially long-range precision-guided missiles — would provide Russia with a relatively safe zone in the High North from where it could target large parts of Western Europe and threaten maritime traffic in the Atlantic.

Comparative military developments
How the US responds to China’s anti-access/area denial capabilities in East Asian waters is important for understanding how the US might address a similar challenge from Russia in the North Atlantic. US strategic concepts and military doctrines that will guide its operations in the maritime waters of Europe are shaped by developments in East Asia and the rise of China. Concepts such as the Third Offset, AirSea Battle and the Multi-Domain Battle, are largely a response to China’s increased capabilities and will inform US thinking about the functions and use of military force in Europe. The US Joint Doctrine, signed and approved in October 2016 and termed the Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (JAM-GC), will not only guide US operations in its rivalry with China, but also describes how US forces will operate in Europe. Such concepts and doctrines seek to support and inform US and allied forces in countering rising threats to US access and maneuver, in sustaining conventional deterrence and in maintaining US technological superiority in both of its flanking regions.

The development of military capabilities, new technologies and platforms in one region does not take place in isolation. Advances in missile technology, the development of missile defense and radar systems, and enhanced space and cyber capabilities, all demonstrate that the effects of military modernization are global. How such capabilities are developed, implemented and used in one region can affect another region. The price, upgrading and maintenance of the new F-35 fighter will be affected by sales to Europe and East Asia. How these aircraft are deployed in military operations today and in the years to come will be shaped by experiences gained from the US and its allies’ training and operations in Europe and East Asia. The new US-China superpower rivalry will...
have global effects and drive developments in new technologies ranging from artificial intelligence, quantum computing, biotech, nanotech, unmanned capabilities, robotics and 3D printing.

US ambitions for a global missile defense system involve co-operation with allies in both Europe and East Asia. Japan operates a full-spectrum missile defense system in close co-operation with the US, which includes transfers of assets, joint research and development (R&D) ventures, financial burden sharing, forward basing of US missile defense assets on Japanese territory and shared use of Japan-based missile defense assets on Japanese territory. Conversely, while South Korea accepted the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system, it decided not to join US efforts to develop a region-wide missile defense system and said that it will not accept any additional THAAD batteries. As the US seeks to implement its missile defense system in Europe, the current testing of the US-Japan missile interceptor, the Standard Missile 3 and 6 (SM-3 and SM-6), provides valuable experiences when it comes to operationalizing a European missile defense system. In addition, South Korea’s position and posture provides the US and its European allies with guidance when it comes to managing relations with both Russia and China, both of whom protest strongly and argue that the missile defense system undermines the regional and global strategic balance.

Balancing Deterrence and Reassurance States in both Europe and East Asia are adjusting to great power politics and increased rivalry. In the previous phase of superpower confrontation during the Cold War, many US allies struck a balance between deterring and reassuring the Soviet Union through integration and screening within the NATO alliance. Similar patterns of behavior are recognizable in Europe and East Asia today. Whereas strengthening an alliance can increase the allies’ collective deterrence and defense capabilities, it risks provoking rivals into amassing military arms or building up alliances, potentially spiraling into a costly and detrimental arms race. Identifying the appropriate balance between deterring and reassuring one’s adversaries accordingly is a key concern for states in reconfiguring their geopolitical alignments, whether it be in East Asia or in Europe. The terms “deterrence and reassurance” are very much at the core of the renewed debate, as NATO seeks to find the appropriate response to Russian aggression. In response to a more aggressive and assertive Russia, they seek to enhance NATO’s defense and deterrence posture and prevent abandonment, but simultaneously seek to reassure Russia and prevent entrapment. These predicaments mirror those facing South Korea, Japan, the Philippines and Australia, as they seek to strengthen their alliance with the US, while simultaneously trying not to provoke China. Although South Korea and Australia seek more co-operation with China, they are also developing closer ties with the US to prevent becoming too dependent on China. Similar to contemporary developments in the relationship between NATO and Russia in Europe, East Asian states and the US are attentive to the balance between deterrence and reassurance in their relationship with China. Similar factors are driving the strategic adjustments and policy preferences of states in East Asia and Europe. Geography, history, military capabilities, domestic politics and economics explain not only the different balance between deterrence and reassurance developed in states such as Norway, Poland, Germany and Turkey as they seek to strike a balance in their relationship with Russia in Europe, but also why Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Australia pursue different balances between deterrence and reassurance in their policies towards China in East Asia.

The Risk of War We cannot rule out NATO involvement should a conflict erupt in East Asia, for example on the Korean Peninsula, in the East China Sea, in the Taiwan Strait, or in the South China Sea. European states could be affected both directly and indirectly. We know that the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 had important implications for European security and NATO. While the current diplomatic breakthrough on the Korean Peninsula could promise more stability, there could easily be setbacks during the negotiations and in the aftermath of any agreements. Many difficult issues are likely to be unresolved for the foreseeable future, including North Korea’s arsenal of nuclear and biological weapons and the strong US military presence on the Peninsula. While a conflict on the Korean Peninsula is unlikely to affect Europe in similar ways as the conflict of the early 1950s, the implications for Europe of another war are significant. NATO’s Article 5 could be invoked, for instance, thus involving many European member states in such a war. If the US does not defend its ally South Korea from an attack by North Korea, it could indirectly undermine the credibility of US alliances and security in Europe. Conversely, if the US launches a preventive war against North Korea without the consent of its close ally South Korea, it could also indirectly undermine US alliances in Europe. Finally, European investments and citizens in South Korea and Northeast Asia are likely to be at risk.

A potential conflict between China and the US over Taiwan could have both direct and indirect implications for Europe. European states could be dragged into a war to support the US, or Europe could be affected by the havoc a war involving the two largest economies in the world would have on trade and financial stability. Similarly, a conflict in the South China Sea, where about 30 percent of world trade transits, a large proportion being European trade, would have a significant impact on European interests.

It remains uncertain how European states would respond to the risks of conflict in US-China relations and East Asia. Several questions loom: In what ways can the EU and European states support the US in a contingency in East Asia? How might European states respond if asked by the US whether they are with us or against us in a potential conflict with China? What evacuation plans have allied states developed for their citizens caught up in any hostilities and conflict in East Asia? What concrete steps can the EU and European states take in order to preserve and uphold the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and its arbitration procedures in the South China Sea? What role is there for Europe in crisis management and crisis prevention and how can European states promote confidence-building measures and strengthen institutional co-operation? There is clearly, therefore, a need to better understand how the US-China rivalry and the risk of war in East Asia could affect Europe.

The future of the US’s grand strategy, the credibility of its alliances, the role of deterrence, the adjustments of secondary states to great power rivalry, military modernization and the emergence of a new world order are issues shaping current strategic thinking in Europe and East Asia. In order to gain a better understanding of these core themes, we need to examine how they overlap in the US’s two flanking regions and understand the effects of a new bipolar international system.