

There is a lot of thought going into the need for a European grand strategy. Some of it is very good but much of it focuses on the small stuff, ignoring the evidence that we are at a turning point and need to think big. Russia is back, China is rising, and our old ally America whose protection had made an independent European strategy hard to imagine is pivoting to Asia. Strategy grand or otherwise needs just three things: a vision of what you want, honest and accurate understanding of the environment, and a set of actions that get you to your objective, taking account of environmental factors. Better still, taking advantage of them, says Philip Shetler-Jones.

What do Europeans really want? Safety and prosperity. Europe's only real security threat? Russia. The main driver of global prosperity? Asia, centred on China. So Europe should do two things: outflank Russia by partnering with China, and partner with Indo-Pacific powers to insure against dependence on China.

Partner with China to balance Russia

A century of history proves that the West needs Asian allies to prevail. From 1902 Japan helped Britain with the Tsar. China diverted Japanese land forces in the Second World War, and Asian allies Japan, Korea and Taiwan helped win the Cold War. In a global confrontation, disregarding Asian alliances is geopolitical malpractice. Had Nazi Germany coordinated with Imperial Japan against Russia, it could have altered the outcome of the war. It is why Nixon went to China and opened up a new flank against the Soviet Union.

Today again Europe's main security problem is Russia, which, post-Crimea, is hoping that partnership with China will shelter it from the ruin of isolation. Likely or not, a Russia-China axis would be bad news for European security and prosperity. It would embolden Russia and complicate our relations with China. The usual way to prevent such a relationship being established is to find a weakness a seam like an area of contention and drive in a wedge.

We do not have to look so hard. Xi Jinping told the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit of China's silk roads by land and sea. China is determined not to be contained by the United States (US) Pivot. The Silk Road Economic Belt through Central Asia crosses former republics of the Soviet Union and prospective members of Putin's Eurasian Union. Since the whole point of this project is to connect China and Europe economically, it is incompatible both with the re-establishment of the old Russian 'sphere of influence' and with the Eurasian autarchy model. This and Sino-Russian competition over resources in the region makes it ideal as a 'seam' in the Russia/China axis.

The Silk Road Economic Belt is the natural basis for Sino-European common interest. Partnering with Beijing on this project helps achieve both of Europe's strategic objectives. First, it offers a basis for strategic cooperation that will create a balance against Europe's only major security threat Russia. Second, it offers a way to lock in trade interdependence with China. Europe should pour diplomatic and economic resources into partnering with China to establish the Economic Belt around Russia and to develop market and strategic opportunities in Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Middle East.

Partner with Indo-Pacific powers to hedge against dependence on China

The maritime silk road also represents a strategic opportunity. For one thing, it enables Europe to hedge against over-dependence on China. It is not in our long-term interests that China is in a position to abuse its power at the expense of the Asian nations whose relations we value and whose values we share. None of them wants to see their region transformed into a Beijing-centred bloc. Some would be prepared to fight to prevent it.

A quadrilateral alliance (US, Japan, Australia and India) is forming to prevent Chinese regional naval hegemony. If China's neighbours continue to feel intimidated they will be joined by the Philippines, Vietnam and perhaps others. No matter how far and how fast China rises, it would be futile to oppose such a coalition, so the object should be to give the broader

Indo-Pacific group the credibility to deter anyone from starting a fight.

Should we get involved? European prosperity is increasingly dependent on the health not just of China's economy, but on the economic dynamism of whole Asian region. A violent struggle would inflict terrible damage on the region, and, given the US security guarantees to Japan, the Republic of Korea and Taiwan, it could spiral out of control. In that event, our transatlantic security relationship would not allow us to stand aside.

Or would it? It is not self-evident that a more purposeful European approach to Asia would be welcome in the context of Obama's 'rebalance'. So far, apart from a one-off gesture from former US Secretary of Defence Panetta (who invited Europeans to join the pivot to Asia), the dominant message from across the pond has been that Europe should buck up and take care of its neighbourhood, allowing Uncle Sam to pivot away. The response to Ukraine has also exposed how much repair work Europe has to do in order to make conventional deterrence credible in the neighbourhood.

Ultimately, the question of how Europe should be involved in Asia is one it has to answer for itself, but involvement on the lines suggested looks to be compatible with US interests all the same. America does not yet seem to have settled on a post-Afghanistan Central Asia policy. This can be seen as an opportunity for the transatlantic alliance to join forces on issues such as terrorism and energy in the region. As for the Asia-Pacific, one of the things that is starting to emerge as thinking about great power conflict in Asia matures is how important the European contribution could be.

In the event of action short of combat, a sanctions regime similar to that being raised against Russia over Ukraine would be ineffective without European cooperation. If it came to war itself the 'air-sea battle' approach (massive conventional attack using cutting edge technology for deep strike inside China) would not offer a role for European capabilities, which tend to be much less deployable and a generation (or more) behind those of the US military. However, as this concept has started to give way to other approaches like 'distant blockade', the importance of a broader coalition has become clearer. Our forces could be brought to bear in the areas in between, such as the Gulf, the Indian Ocean and the Arctic. A protracted state of war would enlist European economic productivity.

Strategy has been defined as 'making power' out of what you have. In the case of Europeans, the things that give us leverage in the context of military competition in Asia are mainly maritime. We should develop defence cooperation relationships that have been budding over recent years and intensify them in areas where costs imposed by geography tend to be low, such as intelligence sharing, cyber, and joint development programmes in high-tech areas such as radar, missile defence, and submarine and anti-submarine technologies.

If ensuring our Indo-Pacific partners have the means to preserve a plural Asian order is a good way to ensure our prosperity and our security, Europe has to consider its contribution. European diplomatic energy, technology and naval forces should be put to work helping this coalition to support freedom of navigation and uphold the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. This will support the international order and prosperity in Asia, and at the same time provide a hedge against the possibility that China might be tempted to act in a way that threatens our strategic interests.

Of course there is a contradiction here that has to be addressed. How can Europe be China's friend on the Eurasian continent but an adversary at sea? The answer lies in our values, which influence our views on world order and our relationship with a rising China in Asia. The message is simple, but requires us to be resolute. We would embrace the expansion of peaceful development and trade but oppose any breach of the peace or the rules of international order. We would not take a side in any territorial dispute, but we would respond to or anticipate a threat to change the status quo by force by tipping the balance in favour of

defence and punishing aggression.

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