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Europeans in the Indo-Pacific: Getting Diplomacy Right

By Frederick Kliem and Pascal Vennesson

SYNOPSIS

An ever-growing number of pro-active European stakeholders engage with the Indo-Pacific. We have observed a genuine effort to improve European ties with regional countries but find that there is some room for adjustment in their approaches and methods to convince Indo-Pacific stakeholders of Europe's added value.

COMMENTARY

Over the years, we have been involved in multiple exchanges, formal and informal, large and small, with European politicians, civil servants, diplomats, soldiers and civil society leaders eager to build or improve ties with Indo-Pacific countries and regional organisations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

We thoroughly enjoy these rich, brain storming sessions where busy practitioners, juggling with budgetary, bureaucratic, and other constraints, seek to gain new perspectives to design and develop Asia-Europe relations. Yet, as the war in Ukraine soon reaches its one-year mark, we are convinced that European engagements with Asia can and should do better.

Doing it Better in the Wake of the Russia-Ukraine War

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has cast [doubts](#) over the viability of [the various European Indo-Pacific strategies](#). After [decades of NATO going out-of-area](#), the alliance partners have rediscovered their original raison d'être. In the light of serious resource constraints arising from a war much closer to home, both the European Union (EU) and its member states ought to readjust their Indo-Pacific engagement, focusing on better [targeted](#) policy rather than broad-brush declaratory strategies.

This begins with getting the approach to the region right. Based on our experience, we share five specific ways in which European governments, diplomats, and civil society representatives can improve on their approach. Although our list is neither exhaustive nor a panacea, we hope to encourage the respective stakeholders to question their assumptions, adjust their approach, and find innovative ways to demonstrate Europe's value proposition and influence in the region.

Clarify European Expectations and Limitations

For decades, Asia-Europe relations were characterised by European donor-recipient attitude. Thankfully, this is gradually ending. But diplomacy among equals requires an honest assessment of each other's expectations and limitations. ASEAN leaders are not contented with being at the receiving end of European benevolence but see EU-ASEAN relations as a mutually beneficial partnership.

As such, European diplomacy should be confident enough to both state its own expectations regarding their regional partners' contributions in this [strategic partnership](#) and likewise to acknowledge its own limitations. For example, what use are hour-long lectures about European contributions to military security in the Indo-Pacific when everyone knows that European military capabilities are very limited.

Focus on What Europeans Do Best

Instead, it would be more realistic to focus on a few areas of cooperation in which European contributions can make a meaningful difference. Europeans should build on their comparative advantage and add real value in areas such as inclusive and sustainable trade, green transition, and building bureaucratic and human capacity. This way, Europe's engagement in Asia makes a practical difference to the citizens of both regions. The EU, especially its larger member states, should stop broadening the agenda to include ever-more cooperation areas in which Europeans cannot provide meaningful value-add anyway.

Becoming More Visible, What For?

European public officials often – correctly – lament the lack of visibility of the manifold projects and initiatives, not least resulting from what they see as poor coordination among European initiatives. They typically mention one or two ongoing projects, say in cybersecurity or environmental protection, and upon realising that even experts on these matters have never heard of those, these stakeholders see proof that something must be amiss.

To be sure, in the Information Age some degree of visibility is needed. One can also readily understand that it is part of the job description of diplomats to show that there is more than meets the eye. This helps to convince partners, show commitment, and ultimately help to further develop ties.

The assumption that visibility is an unalloyed good should be questioned. First, visibility for whom? Not all partners value visibility to the same degree and in the same way. In fact, the line between what should be made public or what should remain private may be different in Asia and Europe.

Second, should visibility become an end in itself or should it remain a means to an end? For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous states with much publicity donated to strategically selected countries ([vaccine diplomacy](#)). The EU, on the other hand, donated via the [COVAX](#) facility. Granted, EU officials did not get fancy photos of themselves delivering vaccines to partners, but the EU did the right thing, donating through multilateral mechanisms based on genuine needs, not public relations.

To be sure, Asian partners also have, at times, a too narrow idea of what counts as commitment. But ultimately, while visibility may advance soft power, it does not always translate into more effectiveness. Europeans should thus continue to prioritize genuine influence and not worry too much about superficial public relations.

Acknowledge Indo-Pacific Achievements

We noticed time and again that Europeans tend to talk predominately about themselves when seeking to engage their Indo-Pacific partners. Understandably, they are keen to share how things are done at home and often have a normative agenda, such as improving labour, human rights, or good governance standards. Some even feel the need to explain how the EU works.

Sharing perspectives on tried and tested organisational and policy ideas can surely be useful. However, Eurocentrism is counterproductive in a region where colonial legacies are very much alive and exporting policy recipes in a different context unlikely to work.

Instead, Europeans should share in public speeches what they often share behind closed doors: how genuinely impressed they often are by what they see in Indo-Pacific. Why not start public engagements by publicly praising specific policy initiatives or trends? They should avoid generalities and explain why they find that particular policy, trend or initiative worthy of broader recognition and what they have learned (or plan to learn) from it. On that basis, Europeans can then start to explain how a meaningful cooperation could complement and build upon that achievement for mutual benefits.

Invest in Core Diplomatic Skills

Any dispassionate [assessment](#) of the [various European Indo-Pacific strategies](#) is likely to conclude that there often is a gap between grand ideas and key diplomatic skills. While it may be too much to ask for a knowledge of local language(s), fluency in English is a must but, alas, too often insufficient, even among diplomats. This applies even more to knowledge of local history, politics, and cultures. For example, even ASEAN Desk Officers often only have a very rudimentary understanding of the organisation, and some China policy stakeholders of European countries are not sufficiently familiar with Chinese political history. Imagine trying to understand European politics without understanding the EU or French-German history.

In sum, seemingly minor adjustments would increase the reception of European initiatives in the Indo-Pacific and allow for even more successful inter-regional exchange going forward.

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