

# The European Union and decreasing regional stability in East and South-East Asia

By Frans-Paul van der Putten

## ■ Executive summary

This policy brief outlines how the European Union (EU) has been responding to deteriorating regional stability in East and South-East Asia, and which considerations are relevant for further steps by the EU. For the time being the EU seems reluctant to become seriously involved in regional security in the region. But while keeping a low profile in the security sphere has enabled Europe to focus on its economic interests in Asia, it is doubtful whether this approach can be sustained. It is essential that European countries – regardless of whether or not they are EU members – support the EU’s capacity to develop into a visible and vocal actor regarding Asian security issues.

## Introduction

For many years regional instability in East Asia was primarily related to two security hotspots: the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait. While these remain important, a number of new developments signal a major deterioration in regional stability. These are the growth of tensions in the South and East China seas, and the U.S. strategic rebalance (“pivot”) towards the region. Underlying these developments is the rise of China and the perceptions of and responses to this process by other Asia-Pacific countries, including the U.S. Long-standing territorial disputes dating back to the colonial and early cold war periods, and the lack of robust multilateral security mechanisms provide a volatile environment for this power shift. The aim of this policy brief is to outline how the European Union (EU) has been responding to deteriorating regional stability in East and South-East Asia, and which considerations are relevant for further steps by the EU.

## Increased geopolitical tensions in East and South-East Asia

While China, Taiwan and Japan have long had conflicting views with regard to the ownership of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea, sharp increases in Sino-Japanese tensions over the islands occurred in 2010 and 2012. The 2010 crisis over the detention of a Chinese fishing boat captain by the Japanese coastguard ended

after a number of weeks, when the captain was released. For many years Japan has been exercising administrative control over the island group – which is uninhabited – for instance, through maintaining a coastguard presence. The 2012 crisis, which began when the Japanese government purchased some of the disputed islands from their private Japanese owner, has resulted in an escalation of tension. Beijing increasingly sent coastguard-type vessels into the territorial waters of the islands and in December 2012 it sent a marine surveillance aircraft into the islands’ air-space, which Japanese fighter aircraft attempted to intercept. China’s actions undermine the Japanese claim that it controls the islands and that “there exists no issue of territorial sovereignty to be resolved”. The Chinese navy, too, is increasingly active in the East China Sea close to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. According to Japanese reports, in two different incidents in January 2013 that took place near the disputed island Chinese frigates briefly locked their fire-control radar on a Japanese destroyer and navy helicopter. The Chinese government denied that these latter incidents occurred. Since the beginning of 2013 the number of Chinese entries into the territorial zone around the islands has decreased.

With a new leadership in both China and Japan currently entering office there are signs that the two countries are trying to repair bilateral relations. The 2012 crisis has had a damaging effect on economic relations between the

second-largest (China) and third-largest (Japan) economies in the world. Further escalation remains a distinct possibility and an armed incident between the two countries cannot be ruled out. Such an incident would put the U.S. in a difficult position. Under the 1960 Treaty of Mutual Co-operation and Security between the U.S. and Japan, the U.S. is obliged to defend Japan against a foreign attack. A Chinese attack on Japanese-controlled territory or on Japanese ships or aircraft could therefore involve military counter-measures not only by Japan, but also by the U.S.

The situation in the South China Sea, where there are conflicting territorial claims by China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines, has also been deteriorating in the past few years. Like in the East China Sea, there are occasional bilateral incidents combined with an increased Chinese physical presence. In particular, the territorial disputes between China and Vietnam, and China and the Philippines have become more pronounced. In January 2013 the Philippines announced that it had filed for arbitration with China under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). China, which insists that such territorial disputes should be discussed only in a bilateral setting, has announced that it will not participate in arbitration. The U.S. is involved indirectly in the Sino-Philippines dispute through its security treaty with the Philippines. Moreover, the South China Sea is also the main scene of a dispute between the U.S. and China over the American military presence in China's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Under UNCLOS, a coastal state can claim a zone extending 200 nautical miles from its coastline. China objects to U.S. military activities – such as intelligence gathering – in its EEZ, since these are harmful to Chinese national security. From the U.S. perspective, China's position runs counter to UNCLOS and to the principle of freedom of navigation. In 2001 and 2009 Chinese aircraft and ships attempted to forcefully chase away, respectively, a U.S. surveillance aircraft and maritime surveillance vessel. In 2001 the incident involved the fatal crash of a Chinese fighter jet and the emergency landing of the U.S. surveillance aircraft in China.

Growing Sino-U.S. rivalry sets the context for all of the main security hotspots in Asia. It is unlikely that a long-term solution can be found for any of these issues (the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, East China Sea and South China Sea) if this does not involve an agreement between the U.S. and China on their security roles in the region. While the U.S. currently enjoys a strong position, in the long run it is uncertain whether it can retain a leading role in the region. China, on the other hand, sees its emergence as a regional leader threatened by U.S. efforts to influence the pace and direction of China's rise. The "pivot" is the Obama administration's effort to bolster the U.S. diplomatic, economic and military presence in East/South-East Asia. This move is intended to counter the increased uncertainty among Asian countries about the U.S.'s ability and resolve to preserve a leading role in regional affairs. Important elements of the pivot include U.S. membership of the East Asia Summit

(EAS) and the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Defence Ministers' Meeting "Plus" (ADMM+), the U.S. efforts to greatly expand the Trans-Pacific Partnership into a major Asia-Pacific trade agreement, and various efforts to strengthen the military presence and role of the U.S. in the region. The latter (military) dimension includes the stationing of U.S. marines in Australia and combat ships in Singapore.

The issue underlying the geopolitical situation in the region is the changing balance of power due to China's rise. The U.S. pivot increases pressure on China to change its external policies, but it is unlikely to halt the shifting power balance. As long as China's rapid economic growth continues and the U.S. strives to retain its status as the world's leading power, geopolitical tensions in eastern Asia will continue to grow. In this context any U.S. policy directed at strengthening the U.S. position in Asia comes with the cost of decreasing regional stability.

## The EU response

To date the actions taken by the EU to respond to the increased tensions in East and South-East Asia remain limited. Nonetheless, over the past year the EU has become more active than it had been previously. In June 2012 it published updated guidelines on its foreign and security policy in East Asia. In July, High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton attended the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), a major multilateral forum for regional security affairs. When she was in Asia Ashton also signed the Treaty on Amity and Co-operation in South-East Asia, which brought the EU a step closer to potential membership of the EAS. The EU also released a statement on the Asia-Pacific region jointly with the U.S. In this statement the EU and U.S. urged China and ASEAN to establish a code of conduct with regard to the territorial disputes in the South China Sea and to resolve these disputes in a peaceful manner. The joint statement also pointed at the importance of international law, notably UNCLOS, and confidence-building measures. In September 2012, when Sino-U.S. tensions over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands ran high, the EU issued a statement urging all parties to take steps to calm the situation and seek solutions in accordance with UNCLOS. The same statement also noted that each party should clarify the basis for its claims. Since the September statement was not aimed exclusively at the East China Sea, but rather at "East Asia's maritime areas", the latter element seems to relate to China's territorial claims in the South China Sea. Despite the matter's critical importance, the EU has not formally commented on the deteriorating security relations between the U.S. and China.

More than previously the EU is trying to make itself visible in matters relating to Asian security. This process is likely to have been stimulated by the fact that Washington has been sending strong signals that the growing importance of Asia requires Europe to reconsider its foreign policy

strategy. In February 2013 Vice President Biden of the U.S. stated at the Munich Security Conference that Europe should join the U.S. in engaging “the world”. This seemed to refer to the Asia-Pacific, since the relevant part of Biden’s speech was devoted exclusively to that region. On the same occasion, he also pointed out that Europe has been benefiting economically from, among others, U.S. efforts to maintain peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific. The implication of these statements appears to be that the time has come for Europe to stop acting as a free rider and to make greater efforts to help the U.S. do its work in Asia. Indeed, the joint EU-U.S. statement of July 2012 seems to be a sign of European support for the U.S. approach on Asia.

However, the most important area in which Washington requires European support is the transatlantic region. If European countries can do more to strengthen NATO and secure their own neighbourhood, and if a EU-U.S. free trade agreement – the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) – can be concluded, this would strongly boost the U.S. position with regard to China. Firm European support for NATO would allow the U.S. to concentrate more on its diplomatic and military assets in Asia, without inadvertently benefiting Russia’s strategic position with regard to U.S. interests in Europe. A robust security role for Europe in the Middle East and North Africa would likewise free up U.S. resources. Moreover, the TTIP could substantially strengthen U.S. and EU efforts to induce China to adopt quality standards and adhere to liberal-economic norms that are favourable to the competitiveness of Western economies.

### Considerations relevant for further EU steps

For the time being the EU seems reluctant to become seriously involved in regional security in East and South-East Asia. But while keeping a low profile in the security sphere has enabled Europe to focus on its economic interests in Asia, it is doubtful whether this approach can be sustained. If the EU expects China to take on the responsibilities that come with being a global economic power, it should not set a negative example by remaining absent from security issues in a region where Europe has major economic interests. Also, if the EU wants to shape international standards and contribute to stable Sino-U.S. relations, it cannot do so without being strongly involved in Eastern Asia. The EU’s maintenance of a largely passive role increases the danger of not just a conflict in Asia, but also of Europe getting caught between incompatible interests in its relations with Washington and Beijing.

The following considerations are relevant to further steps by the EU to respond to decreasing regional stability in East and South-East Asia. Firstly, the EU should become more visible. It needs to participate in all regional security forums and speak out whenever new developments may further weaken regional stability. Since the most fundamental security issue in the region is the Sino-U.S. rivalry,

this issue should fall within the scope of the EU’s attention. Secondly, its position should be autonomous and reflect Europe’s interests and values. Without an autonomous position the EU has no credible ability to speak out on developments that threaten regional stability. Although the EU and U.S. are close partners, the EU’s views and approaches are not necessarily always identical to those of the U.S. At the same time, given the fact that many European countries are NATO members, the EU should not lift its arms embargo against China or otherwise take actions that would harm the U.S. in the case of a potential Sino-U.S. conflict. Moreover, the EU should strive to conclude the TTIP. Thirdly, the EU’s policy on Asian security should be guided by the aims of contributing to regional stability and strengthening international law. A balance needs to be found between these two aims. Fourthly, the cornerstone for regional peace is the continued existence of ASEAN as a safeguard of South-East Asian stability and the basis for broader regional multilateral co-operation. The EU’s approach should be aimed at supporting and strengthening ASEAN as a regional organisation, as well as providing broader support for organisations such as the ARF, EAS and ADMM+. Fifthly, individual European countries have limited ability to withstand economic or diplomatic pressure from major states such as China or the U.S. It is therefore essential that European countries – regardless of whether they are EU members – support the EU’s capacity to develop into a visible and vocal actor on Asian security affairs. Unlike most individual European countries, the EU has the potential to take a relatively autonomous position on politically sensitive issues. And, finally, the EU should take into account that nationalism and feelings of insecurity in Asia are partly rooted in Europe’s former colonial policies. Although the EU, as an institution, is a newcomer on the global stage, it should be careful when it comes to criticising others for behaviour that is to some extent produced by Europe’s historical role.

### Further reading

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