Europe seeking a more active role in guiding the future of Asia

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In case you don't know, Europe and Asia have three 60 per cent relations - they have 60 per cent of the world's population, 60 per cent of the world's trade, and provide 60 per cent of the world's output.

The point was made succinctly by Ambassador Andreas Michaelis, the director-general of Asia and Pacific Affairs at the German Foreign Ministry, to accentuate the importance of relations between Europe and Asia. But then, he could only go so far.

Michaelis was enthusiastic when he talked about Asia, as he kept repeating that he just got back from Pakistan, a hotspot country for Europe. An initiative on Pakistan and Afghanistan is planned for the G-8 summit to be held in Heiligendamm, Germany from next Wednesday till Friday. "With these two countries included, Asia is very high on our agenda," he told two dozens of Asian and European journalists gathering ahead of the Asean foreign ministers' meeting that began yesterday. Indeed, it was a very frank assessment of the current state of Europe-Asia cooperation. Thanks to Pakistan and Afghanistan, and their lack of cooperation in fighting the rise of Taleban fighters in recent months, Asia does mean something to the leaders of Europe.

Countries in East Asia, especially Asean Plus Three members (Asean-10, Japan, China, Korea) should be grateful to Pakistan and Afghanistan because without them Asia would be off the European radar screen. It's as simple as that. Otherwise, the so-called "three times 60 per cent relations" would not mean a thing. Europe today faces all sorts of problems including dealing with a stubborn and powerful Russia, the messy situation in the Middle East, the uncertain future in Kosovo and managing troubled ties with the US.

Luckily, Asia is paying more attention to Pakistan. Last year, it was admitted to the Asem club, along with India and Mongolia. Pakistan will be upgraded from a sectoral to a full dialogue party of Asean at this year's annual Asean meeting taking place in Manila in July, after having occupied its current position for 15 years. Now, New Delhi is moving forward with a broader agenda engaging Asia as a whole.

Besides the immediate threat of the Taleban and terrorism in Pakistan and Afghanistan, which has heightened security cooperation, Europe has also zeroed in on three other Asian countries - China, Japan and India. At the Asem meeting, the EU will have three separate meetings with these countries. After all, Asia has not been forgotten. These meetings will work in a troika format, comprising the current, former and forthcoming president of the EU.

In recent months, Cambodia, as a coordinator of Asean-EU ties, has tried hard to arrange the first Asean-EU summit so that it commemorates the 50th anniversary of relations between the two bodies. But it is impossible to get all 27 European and 10 Asean leaders together just for a day of meetings. Asean had to be content with the troika format. Already, President George W Bush has agreed to meet Asean leaders in an inaugural summit in Singapore in September.

On its own, Europe is generally interested in the security situation in Asia, apart from the immediate threats coming from terrorist elements in Pakistan and Afghanistan. At the top of the agenda is the nuclear proliferation issue, the crisis in the Korean peninsula, and the tension over the Taiwan Straits. These are long-term conflicts that need conflict-resolution approaches including confidence-building measures, which Asia often lacks.

Michaelis said that Europe would like to contribute to the security architecture of Asia, acting as a "soft security actor" to ensure that future conflicts can be contained and resolved. European nations, despite having a long history of conflicts and rivalries, have managed to live peacefully and cooperate for the common good and mutual security and this could be a helpful example for Asia. The efforts of the European monitoring team in Aceh working together with Asean last year in implementing the peace process there is cited as a good example. Europe can help with capacity building and security consulting.

During a roundtable discussion over the weekend, the two-dozen Asian and European journalists present believed that Europe could offer valuable advice and good practical examples in forging security cooperation and instilling mutual confidence among Asian countries. The current setting of the Organisation of Security and Economic Cooperation in Europe could be useful because it encompasses the whole gamut of relations including security, human rights, democracy, among other areas. Asia currently has only the region-wide security framework, known the Asean Regional Forum, which has been led by Asean since its establishment in 1994. It has not reached the stage of conflict-prevention and resolution that Europe has.

Deep down, Europe knows exactly its strengths and weaknesses, as well as how it can contribute to the security of Asia. On one hand, Europe will complement and cooperate with US efforts to promote stability - whether they are on the regional or global level.

On the other hand, as many Asian countries hope, it will serve as a balancing wheel against US influence. These dual roles will be assertively played out in the years to come.

All told, it helps to understand why the EU decided to accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation this year. Actually, Asean was caught unprepared when the EU acceded so quickly. Since 1992, Asean has been urging major powers to accede to its code of conduct, but to no avail. Now the ball is in the Asean court, as it has to amend the agreement to enable a grouping like the EU, the first member of this kind, to accede to it.

It is clear Europe wants to be an active partner in shaping the future of Asia, especially within the framework of East Asian Summit. The two-year-old strategic forum has already attracted interest from major countries, and this could be a helpful example for Asia. The efforts of the European monitoring team in Aceh working together with Asean last year in implementing the peace process there is cited as a good example. Europe can help with capacity building and security consulting.

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