

## Category II

Asia winner

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### **The Future of Asia-Europe Cooperation**

Let's take a moment to imagine the future: a digital, hyper-connected world, convenient and efficient beyond imagination. However, only the bravest dare to venture past the safety of our clean, cool buildings; to step outside would mean braving the heavy heat and dirty air, the result of lacking climate policies in the early 2020s. The economy, driven endlessly by technological advancement, could see countries outgrowing traditional powerhouses<sup>1</sup>, inverting the status quo of global power distribution. How will the rapidly evolving fields of technology, climate, and the economy shape political decisions in Asia and Europe today? What will this mean for the future of innovation, security, and social connections?

Based on today's trend, we can foresee an increase in cooperation between major European and Asian countries in the field of technological advancement and economic growth. Both continents are highly cognizant of the need for international collaboration to remain competitive in the global market. Further, major players including China, India, and the European Union (EU) are spearheading economic integration through foreign investment drives like the Belt-and-Road Initiative<sup>2</sup>, and active foreign policies are being developed and implemented in rising economies such as India. This signifies great potential for Asia-Europe

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<sup>1</sup> "The World in 2050." PwC. Accessed February 24, 2023.  
<https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/research-insights/economy/the-world-in-2050.html>.

<sup>2</sup> "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative." Council on Foreign Relations. Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed February 24, 2023.  
<https://www.cfr.org/background/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

cooperation in the field of innovation, as stronger economic ties are conducive for globalization of international corporations, the movement of manpower, and combined production and development of goods and services.

Already, the EU-Singapore Digital Partnership was announced in December 2022, signifying transformative potential for both Singapore's and the EU nations' economies. With key outcomes of the partnership including trusted data flows, joint efforts to fortify supply chains, and efforts to advance new and emerging technological areas such as artificial intelligence (AI)<sup>3</sup>, this partnership is a clear signal of the strengthening relationship between Asia and Europe. Baidu and Bosch, two heavyweights in the fields of the Internet and AI and the auto industry, have also announced strategic alliances to jointly develop smart mobility<sup>4</sup>. This opens doors for future joint innovation between Asia-Europe companies, highlighting the positive potential on both economies. Evidently, we see a preference of Asia-Europe cooperation rather than competition, with clear positive outcomes already visible. With this foundation of trust, it is likely that in 25 years, we see both Asians and Europeans benefitting from the outcomes of innovation in various fields, increasing quality of life and widening employment and career development.

However, increased collaboration can lead to increased internal competition – rather than both economies rising, will Europe or Asia compete to emerge winner? Of course, it is possible that the future is not as rosy as imagined. Both Asia and Europe possess heavy artillery and weapons of mass destruction and have formidable military strength. With the current world order based on state sovereignty and maintaining state strength, conflict between the continents

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<sup>3</sup> “European Union-Singapore Digital Partnership (EUSDP).” MTI. Accessed February 24, 2023. <https://www.mti.gov.sg/Trade/Digital-Economy-Agreements/EUSDP>.

<sup>4</sup> “Baidu in Self-Driving Car Tech Tie-Ups with Bosch, Continental.” Reuters. Thomson Reuters, June 1, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-baidu-autonomous-idUSKBN18S68Q>.

may be possible. Specifically, China and the Four Asian Tigers (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan) are competition against the EU. However, this essay posits that conflict is not plausible due to two main reasons: geographical distance, and history.

First and foremost, Europe and Asia are geographically distant, insulated by the presence of other countries. This means that neither side has a meaningful military presence in the other, with proximal concerns taking up greater priority. This implies that neither side perceives the other as a threat. Going one step further, it could even be argued that each side is taking steps to protect the other, due to economic interests. One instance would be Operation Atalanta, the EU's anti-piracy naval force mission, securing international shipping traffic between Asia and Europe<sup>5</sup>. Second, the longstanding history of cooperation between the EU and ASEAN also plays a major role. As mentioned above, a foundation of trust helps build ties for future growth. With the high levels of economic interdependence, alongside the lack of malign security threats, conflict is unlikely.

Despite economical, technological, and geographical factors driving Asia-Europe cooperation, there are factors threatening this harmony. Ideological differences on key intangible issues, such as the environment, human rights, and sovereignty, have historically led to dissonance. Stemming from differences in culture, Asian powerhouses typically regard growth as their priority, with many having developmental state approaches, leading to a prioritization of projects such as infrastructure or mining of resources as compared to sustainability or conservation. This contrasts with the EU, where many countries are at the forefront of sustainable development. Citizen involvement is also starkly different, where Asian countries have a largely apolitical population, whereas European countries have more active and involved citizens. Therefore, dissonance on plans may arise when the priorities of

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<sup>5</sup> "Home." EUNAVFOR. Accessed February 24, 2023. <https://eunavfor.eu/>.

different states do not align. Europe has also had a history of pushing for human rights in Asian countries, which conflicts with many states' belief in their sovereignty and that other countries should neither comment nor interfere.

Unlike tangible issues such as policies or legislature, ideology is much more difficult to change. It is likely that the real threat to Asia-Europe cooperation lies not within politics, but more of the mindset of the citizens and political leaders. However, without Asia-Europe cooperation, citizens of both regions may lose out on an interconnected future that could bring efficient development and increased life quality. Hence, it is important for organisations like ASEF to promote the building of relationships between these regions through avenues such as the ASEM, in order to promote understanding and mutual connection.

## References

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