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Europe and Asia

Mutual Perceptions and Expectations on the Way
to a New Partnership in the twenty-first Century



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Asia's Role in the World: A View from Europe

Volker Stanzel

It may seem impossible to say anything meaningful about an entire continent such as Asia with all its diversity. Clearly, the countries of Europe — even geographically most distant partners such as Finland and Portugal — are closer to each other in history and in culture than, for example, Mongolia and Papua New Guinea. On the other hand, the stronger European cohesion opens the way for a clearer definable European perspective of what role Asian countries play in the world, a question more than ever in need of an answer since the events of September 11th.

Before we turn our attention to Asia, let us consider what kind of role states generally expect from each other. A country's foreign relations are determined by its interests, by its history, by its traditions, and by irrational factors such as the wish "to look good"— to impress others, to seem strong, to gain respect. Interests being the major rational factor, a state will thus expect mainly that other states facilitate its achievement of its international objectives and will be ready to repay in kind. That kind of relationship has a simple name: "partnership." States look for a partner in one another. There may be a loosely cooperating partnership, as for instance between Germany and Uruguay, or very close partnerships such as the one between Germany and France, both for obvious reasons. Finally, not many such partnerships are fully balanced, not many, however, are as asymmetric as for instance the one between Germany and the United States — a medium-sized European power and the world's one remaining superpower.

These preliminary considerations should make it easy to conclude what Asia's role in the world might be from a European point of view: the role of a good partner.

Much too easy? Let us give it a closer look, looking first at German interests in Asia (and assuming, to facilitate our analysis, that the interests of our European allies do not differ inherently from Germany's).

Politically, the basis of all further aspects of our relationship with Asian countries is stability and peace in the Asia-Pacific region. How do you define states which are stable and peaceful in the long term? Stable, peaceful states are those that do not pursue political, economic, or military conflicts, and which represent the interests of their citizens abroad and at home in that they do not produce potential for conflict in their societies. Normally, these are states which offer sufficient participation to their citizens in their political, economic, and social decisions, states which offer a credible degree of justice and rule of law. Taking this aspect into account, our wish for human rights to be respected in other countries does not only have an ethic foundation and a legal character (i.e. implementing the human rights pacts of the United Nations), but is also interest-based. States which have been unstable (also in Asia) over the past half century were in most cases states which were not governed democratically.

Economically, Germany looks for partners in Asia that are able to conduct productive economic exchange with it. A precondition for economic relations that are advantageous in the long term is a developed industrial society. Looking at Germany's economic relations with other countries across the board, you will find that its relations are most productive and profitable where it is dealing with a partner at the same stage of economic development. It is therefore no surprise that Germany's major trading partner in Asia has been Japan for a long time and that the relationship is profitable for both sides. A productive economic exchange becomes possible not only through industrial development but also through market liberalization. Germany's aim therefore is to eventually welcome all Asian partners as OECD and WTO members. If plans for a free trade area in South-East Asia are realized, and if such a free trade area later includes other countries and regional organizations in Asia, Germany then would have partners with whom economic relations could develop to levels similar to those it presently has across the Atlantic, and which would result in sustainable affluence to the benefit of all involved. If I say "sustainable", I allude to the necessity to create conditions which do not lead to the destruction of the foundations of our wealth. That is to say, we need to pursue a policy which preserves our natural resources, protects the environment and gradually shifts to the use of renewable energy sources. Again, we will be more successful if such policies are pursued by more partners, rather than just by a few.

Culturally and *socially*, we need partners that enrich our own culture and society. It would not be to Germany's advantage to have Asian partners that are more and more homogenous in the sense of what we today call a "one world" culture. We want to build bridges between cultures, improve comprehension across divides, but not have all cultural differences disappear in some kind of Sichuanese hotpot. Mankind's common values are sufficiently defined by the basic United Nations' treaties. Living together in this world and cooperating for mutual benefit therefore needs to be based on unequivocal dedication to those UN principles and to their implementation in all countries of the international community, whether to the East or the West of the Eurasian mainland. That much said, however, sufficient room is left to safeguard indigenous cultural values and characteristics. Only by recognizing differences from our own culture, can we understand not only our partners but also ourselves. Only by learning from our partners and by learning to recognize these differences, can we further develop our own cultures. To achieve this, we therefore need Asian partners aware of their own cultures, developing from the bedrock of the heritage and values enshrined in the United Nations pacts and treaties, and ready for a give-and-take approach from which both sides stand to gain.

That kind of partnership is easier where interests with our Asian partners overlap. Within the G8, for example, we have already achieved great similarity in outlook and interest, the same is true of ASEAN with which the EU closely cooperates, in many aspects, in ways which would have been inconceivable only a decade ago. In other cases, there are still greater differences in opinion, for instance, on the proliferation of danger-

ous technologies as in the case of North Korea, or in the question of developing nuclear arms as with India and Pakistan.

Whatever the difference in the intensity of existing relations, there still is much scope for further development: only 11 percent of the EU's exports are destined for the entire Asia-Pacific region (while 15 percent go the United States alone)! We have our fair share of political problems to deal with — terrorism, proliferation, migration problems, and others. Promoting our interests thus means first of all solving such problems, and solving them together, in a spirit of partnership.

If we believe a widespread perception, Marco Polo discovered a faraway and enchanting "Orient" to Europe. This is a delusion. The region's engagement in world affairs began thousands of years ago. What we need to recognize is that there has always been a role for Asia in Europe's eyes. This role was mainly determined by intercultural and economic relations, beginning on the Silk Road and with Arab traders bringing the spices of India and South-East Asia to Europe. Economics was the driving force behind cultural exchange. Asian art today not only fills Western museums, but it also had a palpable impact on Western art in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. Asian poetry and philosophy had an impact on Western poets and philosophers, and vice versa. Intercultural relations have of course included the realm of political and economic ideas. European and American political thinkers beginning with the 17th century were captivated by what they understood of the teachings of Confucius, just as Darwin, Marx, and the proponents of the idea of democracy had their impact on Chinese and Japanese intellectuals a century or more later (curiously, in matters of religion, the flow of ideas, whether Christian or Islamic, ran mainly one way, towards Asia).

I would like to emphasize the lasting importance of intercultural and economic exchange because it is usually overshadowed by political relations — which, at the latest since the beginning of the colonial period, have certainly changed the political landscape in Asia dramatically and have set in motion Asia's participation in the so-called "globalization" of our world. If we Europeans look at the major events of the second half of the past century, it is obvious that we will consider the collapse and dissolution of the Soviet Union as events of global historic importance. For the peoples of Asia, there were other events of memorable significance. South Korea and Taiwan both emerged as stable democracies. The people of China reassumed sovereignty over Hong Kong. The rapid growth of international economic exchange in the post-World War II era and the gradual integration of communist and former communist states into the global economy created a level of *interdependence* the world has never seen before. It was not until the 19th century that the terms of trade had shifted against Asia — not until industrialization in the West made its products more valuable than those available indigenously. The recognition that the science and technology of Europe (and the United States) were vital sources of the growing wealth of the West, and preconditions to competing successfully, perhaps to surviving as independent states, led first Japan, then China, and, after de-

colonization, most of the states of Asia to open their doors to Westernization. From the 1960s until the late 1990s, most nations of Asia benefited tremendously from their involvement. Japan rose high, and the "Little Dragons" — Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan — followed suit. In the 1980s, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand began producing economic miracles of their own. China joined them in the 1990s when India, too, began to liberalize its economy. The free flow of goods and capital created wealth for all who participated. Stock and real estate values soared in most of these states. And then, in the late 1990s, it all came tumbling down as currencies crumbled, banks failed, stock and real estate values fell, and unemployment rose. The stability of some of the region's regimes seemed less certain once the legitimacy that came with prosperity was undermined. An unexpected change came in Indonesia, where Suharto was driven from office after leading his country for more than thirty years. The possibility of Asia's political troubles affecting neighbors and the rest of the world were of grave concern due to the development of nuclear weapons in India and Pakistan.

On the other hand, Asia enters the 21st century flooded by the most visible effects of globalization. American music and Italian restaurants are proliferating in Asian cities as much as they have in much of the rest of the world. Watches and designer clothes from Japan and the West, plus local imitations, can be seen everywhere. Part of what is changing Asia is that globalization has reached almost every part of East Asia — and globalization has usually meant Westernization, sometimes even Americanization, as has been pointed out to us ever so often since September 11th.

Indeed, the price of globalization in both economic and political terms could prove to be very high for all concerned. This is one of the clear messages given to us on September 11th. If nothing else, the perception that globalization represents nothing more than lower internet access and transport costs, and interdependent economies, has been turned on its head. The persistence of old-fashioned forms of international violence has shown that we still do not live in the "one world" the media would have us to believe. Our networked, communicative, globalized society is but one sphere of this world. One notion behind this sphere maintains that the disappearance of international barriers creates incentives for peaceful conflict resolution. But as we see, international society is still characterized by the well-known, old sphere of violent conflict resolution (or perpetuation), and this is true mainly for the countries of the south. Their social world again appears to consist of two spheres. Globalized elites are linked by affluence and technology. Meanwhile, the populations at large in the cities are tempted by nationalism, racism and a multitude of movements to free themselves from what they perceive to be American domination. In such a mood, attacks on globalization may well develop into a new ideological radicalism, making it difficult to build the political consensus on which domestic stability, international peace, and the aforementioned positive partnership between nations depend. The large industrial countries and their multinational enterprises are too widely perceived to be the principal beneficiaries of globalization. The tensions

between economic realities and what is politically sustainable may shake both the economic and the political systems around the world. One political challenge to this entire process has become apparent in one Asian country: Afghanistan, offering refuge to the Al-Qaeda terrorist network. Some of the danger of popular masses in Third World countries supporting terrorism may possibly be averted by accelerating free trade and increasing in affluence. But even if multilateral free trade progresses at a fast pace, the industrial world must not lose sight of the major political challenge we face: What kind of development can forestall a political backlash against globalization? While the self-righteousness and violence of the terror acts of September 11th is repulsive, the event in itself warns us that the international system faces a crisis of legitimacy. Asian and European countries together must preserve and indeed extend that system that fostered so much prosperity for so many peoples. In the long run, they can only do so if they combine agreement on the basics of their partnership with concrete issues on which to act.

It is evident that several Asian countries are likely to emerge in the 21st century as important players in the international economic and political system. The critical question for other Asian states, and for us Europeans with our interests in the region, therefore will be: How will these major powers of Asia use their power? Certainly American, together with European, economic strength will provide some influence on actions and decisions of Asian states. So they might well conclude that their interests as well as their Asian neighbors' interests are best served through a continuation of partnership amongst themselves and with Europe (and the United States). Their economic growth depends on foreign markets, capital and technology transfers, all of which are most accessible in times of peace. Possibly, however, there might be conflicts over security threats, or threats to the territorial integrity of one or another state in Asia. Whether autocratic or democratic, neo-nationalism seems certain to be a major force in many countries in Asia. In others, even giant ones like Indonesia, nation-building is far from being a matter of the colonial past. What is needed at this point is the will to expand partnership on both sides. We need an active approach from Europeans and Asians alike. In the aftermath of September 11th, we face the danger of submerging ourselves in cultural and political antagonism. A clash of civilizations, however, does not help either side. An initiative to avoid this must come from Asia as well as from Europe. Constructive partnership means an active partnership, with activity coming from both sides.

Therefore, let me enumerate a few of the tasks we should shoulder together if we are to bring about that kind of constructive partnership:

Firstly, we should commit ourselves to strengthening the United Nations' role in developing and maintaining international peace. Regional integration is a major contribution towards that goal and one we should promote because integration lends stability to regions in a globalizing world. Europeans and Asians should remain committed to the ultimate goal of the complete elimination of nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction, and to general and complete disarmament under strict international

control. At the same time, we should address the issues of ballistic missile proliferation and export controls for dangerous materials.

Because democracy and the rule of law are the necessary safeguards of human rights for individuals and an essential basis for good governance, we should commit ourselves to promoting and protecting all human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to development. As economic growth and development contribute to the full realization of human rights, we should recognize that one of the greatest challenges of the new millennium will be the eradication of poverty.

We should work for the early adoption and implementation of a comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism. We should cooperate in the fight against terrorism wherever it occurs and regardless of its motives. To successfully do so, Asians and Europeans alike must improve intelligence collection about potential threats and enhance law enforcement; cooperate to disrupt and destroy terrorist operations which exist in many countries in both our continents; impose tighter controls over illicit money, weapons and technology flows; isolate and pressure states that sponsor and support terrorists, and intensify efforts to resolve conflicts around the world, in order to fight repression and poverty which provide breeding grounds for international terrorism. The prosperous and democratic countries are our best allies against terrorism.

We should jointly combat international drug trafficking and drug abuse, its links to terrorism, as well as fight organized crime, arms trafficking, money laundering, and the trafficking of persons, particularly women and children.

We should further strengthen our cooperation on multilateral and environmental issues, addressing the question of sustainable development and the protection of the environment. We should strive for the early ratification of the Kyoto Protocol to deal efficiently with climate change and global environmental degradation, and for pursuance of the agreement reached in Bonn. We should cooperate on the preparatory work relating to the UN Summit on Sustainable Development scheduled for September 2002 in Johannesburg.

The WTO's Fourth Ministerial Conference in Doha has given a much-needed boost to the multilateral system and to economic growth, stability and development. The Doha Development Agenda provides both Asians and Europeans with a major opportunity to further liberalize trade and to strengthen the rules-based system in a way that serves development.

Cultural and educational exchange depends first and foremost on the creative spirits of artists, and on the quality of educational institutions. We therefore should promote venues and events that facilitate such cultural interaction as well as cooperation between relevant cultural industries, universities and private business assuming sponsorships. We should therefore facilitate the exchange of professionals and promote the ongoing interaction between our civil societies.

I have endeavored to outline the general principles and some concrete objectives that we pursue in our relationship with our Asian partners. I can therefore imagine the Asian role in the world as one of partners who shoulder responsibilities for the global tasks of the community of nations together with Europe. This would first and foremost be the responsibility to help establish, build and strengthen democracy and the rule of law, and would also include good governance, the strengthening of human rights and the freedom of the individual. It would also mean shouldering responsibility for safeguarding peace in the world in all its aspects. This objective would be facilitated through multilateral cooperation replacing more and more the traditional methods of bilateral cooperation. The same is true for the objective of disarmament and arms controls so as to combat the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems. With a view to facilitating economic exchange, it is also necessary to shoulder responsibility for free but fair international financial and trade relations, by fighting poverty in the world, by combating international terrorism and by seeking concrete measures to protect our natural resources and the environment. We need to work together in finding ways to represent our common interests together in international fora such as the various organizations of the UN.

Asia was involved in world affairs many centuries before Zheng He set out for Africa, and before Portuguese ships found their way round the Horn of Africa, across the Indian subcontinent, through the Strait of Malacca, and on to landings in China and Japan. Asia has played an important role in European civilization since our civilization's claim to existence. The movement back and forth of goods and ideas for thousands of years never ceased. The nations of Asia have long been essential partners in the international system and they are not likely to be any less so in the 21st century. If we can turn that truth into a constructive partnership, then Europe and Asia alike will play to the full the most ideal roles either side can imagine for the other.