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Strengthening Transatlantic Policy Coordination on Asia

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In December 2015, the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), in cooperation with the French Ministry of Defense, organized a Track 1.5 dialogue that brought together senior diplomats and national security representatives from three major European countries—France, Britain, and Germany—and the United States, as well as members of the European Union as an institution, to discuss transatlantic policy responses to a series of potential security crisis scenarios in Asia.

The point of departure for this meeting was simple: both the United States and Europe have crucial interests in Asia, not only in trade and finance but also in the political and security arenas. As regional security challenges intensify, especially in East Asia, governments understand there is little they can do without increased cooperation among like-minded countries. Yet, despite some initial efforts to enhance U.S.-European cooperation on Asia, relatively little progress has been made, partly due to challenges in the Middle East and Eastern Europe that have required immediate attention.

The objective of December's transatlantic dialogue was to bring to the surface points of convergence and divergence between European and American partners facing serious crisis scenarios in Asia, in both their respective assessments of each situation and their probable policy responses. The conclusion of two days of discussion was that European and U.S. partners need to start working together now to better coordinate responses on Asian security issues. Although at the outset of a crisis interests and actions might seem different from European and U.S. perspectives, both Europe and the United States share a common aim: a stable Asia where established international norms and the rule of law are respected. The challenge is how to improve policy coordination to achieve this goal.

CRISIS MANAGEMENT

In most of the scenarios, U.S. responses were strongly informed by alliance obligations and influenced by the United States' decades-long role as Asia's regional security guarantor. Although an overriding U.S. objective was to deter aggression and protect regional stability without resorting to military action, scenario exercises suggested that the United States would deploy military assets to fulfill mutual defense commitments and signal resolve.

European powers' first reactions to the crisis scenarios tended to gravitate toward diplomatic solutions. Europe is generally less comfortable making military moves during the early stages of a crisis and has fewer assets within the region to do so, although a preference for mediation does not equate with attempts to find a middle ground between disputants. The EU and the major European powers possess sufficient economic power to maintain leverage, and they can use such mechanisms as development assistance, sanctions, or restrictions of technology transfers in order to signal their concern. Exercises demonstrated that as crises intensified, some European countries, notably Britain and France, would consider deployment of military assets to the region in consultation with the United States and its Asian partners.

Moreover, sending clear signals of interest and resolve during the initial stages of a crisis is critical for Europe, given its self-regard as a normative power. As one participant noted, norms do not enforce themselves, and in some conflict scenarios it will be important for Europe to stand alongside those countries in Asia that are resisting attempts to forcefully change the status quo. Taking such a stand is

also important to reinforce the idea that challenges to the international order, whether in Asia or elsewhere, will be met with a broad international response.

IMPROVING POLICY COORDINATION

Even though the United States and Europe generally had the same preferences regarding de-escalation and peaceful resolution, their crisis management approaches often diverged during the exercises, which sometimes complicated effective solutions. Neither side desired to see a common approach, however, even if such an outcome were possible, but there was consensus that much more could be done to improve policy coordination among the transatlantic partners in order to help shape the security environment in Asia:

- *Strengthen information sharing at the working levels of government*. For example, better coordination between foreign and defense ministry policy planning teams—both within Europe and across the Atlantic—would ensure that EU and U.S. partners do not surprise one another with their diplomatic and military activities.
- *Develop opportunities for senior government officials from the United States and Europe to discuss Asian issues within a transatlantic context*. In several instances, the existing interagency process encourages stove-piping so that there are too few chances for wide-ranging discussions.
- *Increase European participation in Asian security discussions*. Further expanding senior European participation in the Shangri-La Dialogue, for example, would allow Europe to demonstrate to Asian countries its strong interest in regional peace and security.
- *Increase discussion of Asian security issues within existing transatlantic forums in Europe*. The annual Munich Security Conference and the Brussels Forum both convene transatlantic leaders, and adding specific sessions on Asia would be helpful.
- *Establish ongoing Track 1.5 dialogues between European countries and the United States to discuss Asian security issues*. Such discussions would facilitate better understanding of perspectives and usefully inform the policy process.

As transatlantic allies, the United States and Europe have worked together to sustain a rules-based, liberal international order in the decades since the end of World War II. The EU, individual European powers, and the United States all have abiding national interests in Asia, where a wide range of challenges—ongoing maritime disputes, brinksmanship and bellicose rhetoric, nuclear proliferation, and transnational terrorism—now threaten peace and stability. Policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic need to think about the potential outcomes they would like to see in the region and determine how to attain common objectives, even while working with different sets of tools. It is imperative that the United States and Europe begin to strengthen policy coordination on Asia now in order to shape the behavior of those who would threaten regional security. ◈

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