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***Triangular formations in Asia
Genesis, strategies, value added and limitations***

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Implications for Europe

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The implications for Europe (of triangular cooperation in Asia)

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It is sometimes said that the most successful track 1 diplomatic conferences are those whose conclusions were written before the meeting starts. Even if it was true, the judgement clearly does not apply to track 2 informal gatherings, of which this conference promises to be a fine example. The following remarks, written before the conference and in anticipation the last session on “the implications for Europe”, are followed by personal conclusions drawn after the event.

Today’s Europe has its triangles, some designed to reinforce cooperation within the EU (the Weimar triangle between France, Germany and Poland), others more competitive (relations between France, Germany and the UK in the EU context were often described as a triangle where balancing on some issues could occur). But Europe, and even more the EU as such, have eschewed the strategic triangles of old, a web of alliances and counter-alliances that were intended to stabilize the continent but often served as accelerators of conflict. All of the European community construction is meant to supersede these forms of balance of power. Therefore, even if games of influence can surface within the EU, a strategic dimension would be a negation of what the EU stands for, and has achieved within its borders: the longest-lasting peace ever recorded on this land.

It is therefore no surprise that the EU, and individual member states, are much more likely to initiate or to take part in multilateral, inclusive relations with Asian partners, or in traditional bilateral relations with single countries in Asia. It is a follow-on of Europe’s aversion for power plays, and it also fits with the unspoken reality that there is, since 1945, only one power balancer in Asia, the United States. And the United States has mostly operated in Asia with a «hub and spoke» concept for its alliances, and with much reluctance to apply its considerable strength to the power plays and disputes within the region.

If you do not want to consider strategic triangles as a possibility for your foreign policy, it follows that you will be less interested in cooperative triangles, because even these triangles usually involve a degree of power balancing. This power balancing may be one of soft power or economics – the gamesmanship of free trade treaties springs to mind, or development aid projects – but even these have more impetus if they are supported by some realist hard power considerations. Such was (is?) the case for an initiative such as the TPP, raising the suspicion of other parties

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that it really has a strategic aim in the traditional sense of geopolitics. That is not the case for European initiatives – and therefore such very timely and promising endeavors such as an EU-Japan FTA or an EU-India FTA take their time to materialize, because the other party knows that the geostrategic upside will be limited, and therefore judges the project more on its intrinsic value. Similarly, China has seemed suddenly interested in a China-EU FTA after the TPP project seemed ready for actual launch. Today, as the prospect of a TPP recedes, China has less of an overriding interest to accept compromises on trade and investment issues in order to move towards the FTA.

Yet there are reasons that push forward Europe towards more consideration of existing triangular cooperation within Asia, or towards its own form of cooperation with Asia-Pacific partners.

The first reason is exactly the one which applies to most of China's neighbors within Asia. China's quick rise and its sometimes less than flexible practices of negotiation create a need for balancing. This is true above all of defense and security issues, including arms sales and security cooperation. The arms embargo in place regarding China, the concerns about freedom of navigation in East Asia, the attendant rise in military procurement budgets across Asia are co-factors. But there is next to no triangular approach to this. Europeans are either security providers to single Asian partners – which are themselves often in a mild competitive relationship – or they tend to take a more multilateral approach. Such is the case of ReCAAP, the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia, of which 14 Asian states and 6 European states are participants. Japan, which is the most active in rebalancing and seeking European security partnerships, has signed separate bilateral agreements with the United Kingdom, France and Germany – although they have basically the same approach and substance (with, notably, a view to common supervision of dual use exports).

The second reason is a growing number of sub regional agreements. This is not the result of a triangular fashion, but an implementation of the “mini-lateralism” concept that has been well received by a region where many sovereign states do not embrace full multilateralism and the risk of a loss of sovereignty. But the most fertile ground for these is not East Asia, but the South Pacific – where small island states and their bigger neighbors have many transverse interests in cooperation. The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and what a recent study calls the «Polynesian triangle» lend themselves to cooperation from France, whose extensive maritime territory is dispersed in the region. The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) could also be a concern, involving India and British or French presence in the area. East and South Asia are a more fertile ground for localized economic growth zones such as Singapore, Johor and

Riau. In more bilateral fashion, China has encouraged regional cross-border cooperation in its North-East provinces, across the coast of Fujian, from Yunnan into South-East Asia, and from Xinjiang into Central Asia. Close to these examples are the value chains created by MNCs in East and South-East Asia, leading to intricate production patterns with much re-export: a key example is the famed iPhone, long hyped as an achievement of the Chinese factory for the world. Key components for the iPhone are in fact sourced in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. These growth triangles are open to outside participation, but largely at the company level. An institutionalized European interest would be overkill.

A third reason could be an American disengagement from the region – an event which all regional allies have reason to fear, but which has not materialized so far. Re-insurance, even if it is only complementary and not substitutive, is now a common attitude throughout the region. The so-called Australia-India-Japan triangle, in fact diplomatically encouraged by the United States as a growing pillar of regional security, is one such development. But no one wishes to formalize what would then look as a counter-alliance to China. Developments remain sectoral, technical, and usually low key in nature. A European involvement would send a wholly different and new message throughout the region.

China-Japan-Korea developments – which certainly have not been in the limelight of the past few years – run counter-opposite, but from an economic rationale. The degree of mutual trade integration among these three economies is in fact larger than that of the European Union – without common institutions and rules. Were these three economies able to leverage their collective strength in innovative endeavors, they would effectively compete with the United State, particularly in the IT and software industries. METI and Japan's former minister of Commerce, the noted politician Taro Aso, once had such a plan to counter at the time Microsoft as a global standard. Politics have decided otherwise.

Could North Korea become a factor for a new convergence among these three neighbors, who each have their own reasons to fear a conflict and its spillover effects? China and the new South Korean government are currently trying to leverage Europeans in terms of further engagement with North Korea to deter this conflictual approach. But for Europeans, the limit of countering any American approach is that they cannot in any case be any firm of substitute for the US security provision to the region. And Japan, whatever its inner reservations about conflict may be, is staying as close as it can to American positions, including on the Korean peninsula.

Afghanistan is a unique case. No neighbor has ever successfully controlled Afghanistan, no Afghan government has been able to dismiss its neighbors' influence within the country, and no global power has ever had a successful Afghan policy. Yet

because it sits at a crossroads, this is not a strategic black hole but a country where a degree of intervention remains necessary, if only in the interest of forward defense. America's and China's roles are both cooperative and contradictory. America's fate is to make the country safe for China to develop it, because no Afghan government – especially one which would have freed itself from drug trafficking – could afford to neglect the Chinese offers for minerals and the attendant transport development. But for China to become militarily engaged would carry the risk of re-importing Islamic terrorism on a larger scale. Pakistan is a proxy for security, but as unreliable to the Chinese as to anyone else. China therefore needs American engagement for security. It is in the European interest to join this particular triangle in the making – without neglecting the dialogues with Russia and Iran, one as a stopgap and the other as a border keeper. As unlikely as it may seem, Afghanistan resonates with Europe's most pressing security concerns.

As explained at the beginning of this draft, the lines above have been written in anticipation of the results from our conference. Our approach was that in the Asian core, Europe should match strong bilateral relations with nation-states with encouragement for the regional organizations that fit Europe's postwar concept, but do not possess the strength that they have in Europe. Taking an "in between approach" by stressing potential regional triangles would either be meddling into big time geostrategy, for which Europe does not have the hard power capacity or will, or unwittingly favoring the fragmentation of the region in the case of ASEAN. This is what we occasionally reproach China with doing in Europe, with its 16 + 1 summit format and its approach to sub regional groupings.

Our actual discussions have not disproved the above hypotheses. But they have also brought much by way of evaluating potential triangles and their role in fostering new Asia-Pacific architectures – in the security and also economic sphere. It does seem that the most down to earth triangle – involving security cooperation among Australia, Japan and the United States, is also the most promising of triangles, because it has a chance to prove useful under any circumstance: either as a complement to the US alliance or support, or as a preparation for a future where the United States would be less present. The least likely triangle is also the most speculative – that of a China-India-Russia team up mixing non-aligned thinking, emerging economy consensus and balancing of the United States and the West. The future of the Korean peninsula and the path towards denuclearization seems to generate several triangles involving on the one hand the United States, on the other hand China. These are hedging or counterweight triangles. The need to consider Asean as a partner in several configurations was expressed – and indeed if the European Union wants its model of regional organization to be emulated, it needs to

support Asean, currently in doubt over the extent of Western support and wary of China's ultimate ambitions. Like the first triangle quoted above, European cooperation should be pragmatic – complementary to the American role but also supportive when this role wavers, without a strategic goal of its own but strongly aimed at reinforcing like-minded partners in Asia.